MONT BLANC

By ROGER TISSOT

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MONT BLANC

by ROGER TISSOT

With a preface *by* Geoffrey WINTHROP YOUNG

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Arrêtons-nous encore un peu, Hugues ! Il est si beau de se reposer sur la cime, et, pour quelques instants de la vie, parmi les nuages, rêver !

Guido Rey

Annecy. — Thiou Canal.

Mont Blanc.

PREFACE

The realm over which Mont Blanc holds sway is as pre-eminent for the beauty of its fertile valleys, and their varied life, as for the impressive immobility of its white domes and sculptured pinnacles. It is the supremacy of the monarch of mountains that may first command our attendance; but, our tribute of admiration paid, we become aware of a loveliness of meadow, torrent-gorge and lesser height, which in vivacious colour and atmosphere forms both a contrast and a setting for the isolation and severity of the presiding mountains. It is a region rich also in historical association, in traces of the influence which nature, more especially in regions of its supreme expression, exercises upon human development. Mont Blanc, by the signals of its seasons, its trailing summer robe of many colours, or its uniform cloak of winter snows, has, in the past, dispatched or recalled the manhood of these valleys on their common mission, to share with the men of other races in their struggle towards freedom and in the slow discovery of the truce, and truth, to be found in the fellowship of nature; even as now, with the turning of the wheel of human progress, the same signals serve to summon the men and women of other

Mont Blanc from Couvercle.

races to assemble in the summer or winter sunshine of the great mountain, and enjoy their common pursuit of vigorous health and natural pleasure.

In the past, as in the present, the English-speaking races have taken no little part in this story of mutual discovery, as between race and race, and men and mountains. Famous men of our country have, for more than two centuries, sought the inspiration, for their writing as for their art, to be found in the mere vision of Mont Blanc. Yet others, famous in more adventurous spheres, gave the first impulse towards the nearer possession of these treasures of height, their conversion to the happiest ends of humanity. For us, therefore, to visit Mont Blanc during the miracle of any of its changing seasons, is a homecoming; its peaks, its pastures, and the warm heart of its people welcome us alike, not as strangers, but as kin.

To the ways of safe exploration in and about this friendly mountain-world, guide-books can direct us. But it is not their province to assist us towards an understanding of what we see, to tell us its associations, or, above all, to infect us with the spirit in which it should be regarded, a spirit which is essential to its right appreciation. Upon our first view of forms of beauty novel to our experience, it is even more important to be guided *how* to see them, than to be told what to look at, or where

to look from. In new districts, which we may only be able to visit passingly as tourists, the very multitude of unfamiliar wonders leaves us in embarrassment; a number will escape us altogether, these often the more valuable because the less obvious impressions; and, of the rest, we shall carry away only a confused, because an undiscriminating memory.

It is to give us just this help that M. Roger Tissot has written his charming survey of Mont Blanc and its environment. He joins us as a cultivated and enterprising companion, rather than as a guide; and he encourages us, more than directs us, by his example and sympathetic enthusiasm, in our determination of what we mean to see, in our search for where and how to see it, in our interest in its associations, and in our appreciation of its aesthetic value. More than this : he shares with us his own delighted intimacy with every view and detail, so giving us the sense of belonging ourselves to this astonishing world, of being made free of its secrets; and he lends us, through the medium of his poetic prose, something of his own ardent spirit, in this way doubling our pleasure; for in learning to see unaccustomed beauty as only those familiar with it can see it, we not only perceive far more than we should unaided, but we enjoy it far more, with the affection of the friend added to the discriminating delight of the artist.

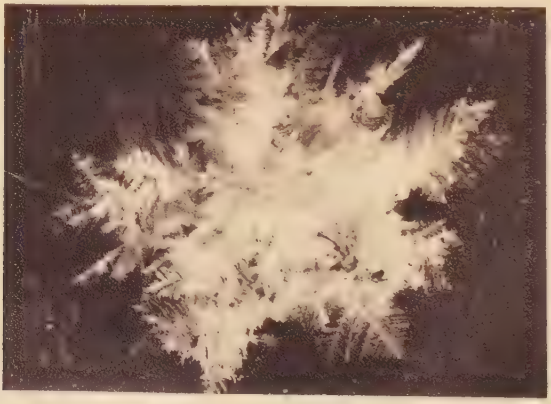
To those already initiated, M. Tissot's name needs no introduction : it is synonymous with that hospitable courtesy which has always distinguished members of the French Alpine and Touring Clubs in their

Mont Blanc from Grenoble.

relations with our countrymen. For the benefit of those who are paying their first of (probably) many visits, it may be mentioned — since we are justly concerned about any one who is to be our companion among high mountains! — that M. Tissot is a native of Grenoble, and therefore familiar from youth with the region; a distinguished man of law and, as will be apparent, of letters. In more active spheres he has been no less distinguished, as a combatant in the war, and as an apostle of mountain-climbing and of winter sports. He was one of the first to introduce Ski-ing in France, and to popularize mountain-rambling. He founded the Dauphiné Ski Club, has organized countless Alpine Meets, written an excellent Ski Manual, and is at the present time President of the Dauphiné Alpine Federation.

Written as by a man of action, with the temperament of a poet, his book is one upon which we can rely, for companionship as much as for guidance, during our adventure among new and romantic impressions; whether, with our eyes upon the summits, we are wandering through the picturesque valleys or ski-ing upon the winter snows, or whether — with our hearts perhaps in the valleys! — we are emulating him in braving a snow-storm on Mont Blanc, wrestling with the gymnastics of the Géant, or penetrating high among the glorious revelations of the great glaciers. It is a book that can stay with us, too, afterwards, as a happy substitute for memory: its beautiful illustrations and inspiring descriptions serving as a fairer recollection than any we could ourselves recall of the wonders we have seen, and of the wonder we have felt.

Geoffrey Winthrop Young.



The Aiguilles of Chamonix.

CHAPTER I

The Call of the Mountains.

> The Gateway to the mountains opened up to me a new life which shall have no end.
>
> RUSKIN.

I longed to see the valley of Chamonix again. I had passed through it before on my way to the mountains, but always in haste, always bent on the heights, with eyes for nothing else. Or else I had been hurrying home, my mind too full of the spell of the mountains to pay any attention to the valley. And moreover I had no wish to come in contact with that gay crowd which presses right up to the foot of the mountains without having any real affection for them.

Annecy, Castle and Pier.

So I made up my mind to visit Chamonix after the season. I wanted to be alone in that little village with the descendants of the old Celtic race which has lived there in the shadow of the mountains for centuries. And by the end of September, the dancing is over; the nights are quiet once more, no worry sound troubles their splendour.

Nevertheless, comfortably seated in the railway carriage, under my faithful ice-axe, which gleams through the rack among my neighbours' umbrellas, I wonder whether I shall not be disappointed and I think regretfully that the Mont Blanc of these melancholy autumn days may perhaps be less beautiful than the Mont Blanc I knew in midsummer.

Shutting my eyes I see those dazzling summer days again — the intense heat of the July afternoons, the rocks burning under a blazing sun, the glaciers glittering with dazzling brillance, and away far up in the resplendent heavens, the crowning, scintillating peak which alone seems capable of resisting the annihilating power of that fiery globe under whose rays the valley pants and seems about to die.

La Roche-sur-Foron.

Dazzled by this vision I opened my eyes again regretfully. For this is an early autumn afternoon and the rays of the sun filter down throught a slight haze. But as the train rises above the plain of Fins, I see the etherial peaks of my beloved mountains appearing in the far distance, veiled by dark clouds.

This is no lovely langourous summer's day when exhausted Nature pants for breath, when the wearied labourers sleep in the deep shadows of the trees, when the blazing sun beats down even into the most sheltered valleys. Apples and pears hang among golden and rust-coloured leaves, the children playing in the fields make the most of the last fine days; under a blue, transparent sky, Nature seems wrapped in an allpervading melancholy — a vague regret for the past, a dread of the icy future.

Through the golden leaves I catch a glimpse of

Tower. La Roche-sur-Foron.

Ciborium. Church of Sallanches.

the torrent, rushing down through its narrow channel; its waters tear along, eager to reach the plain before winter imprisons them in the immobility of the glaciers and the great silence of solitary places.

Silence? Immobility? Could these glaciers I had crossed with such joy and exaltation in former years, be symbolic of death? Must one agree with Chateaubriand " that it is youth and personality that make beautiful places "?

But the feeling with which. I once more beheld the snowy summit of the Buet beyond the valley of the Arve, convinced me that the splendour of the mountains was not dependent on any state of mind. And at Sallanches I asked myself how I could ever have harboured such misgivings, how the memory of these nights in the open under the stars could have escaped me, when, under the shelter of some rock near the Glacier, I had listened to the roaring of the waterfalls, the noise of falling stones in the crevasses, the hollow cracks by which the glacier proclaimed its calm relentless progress.

Sallanches and Combloux, are among the best places from which to get a view of the whole mass of Mont Blanc. One sees the great peak surrounded by its gigantic retinue — to the left the great range of the Aiguilles, properly so-called; to the right, harmoniously spaced, the ma-

Cluze. Bénitier.

Combloux, the Aiguille de Varens.

jestic heights of the Dôme, the Aiguille du Goûter, the Aiguilles of Bionnassay, of Miage and of Trelatête.

" It is impossible ", says Victor Hugo, carried away by this spectacle, " not to be moved to the very depths of one's being, when, on a beautiful August morning, descending the slope of Sallanches, one sees this immense amphitheatre of mountains, of every colour, form, height and position, gradually unfolded before one ".

One does not long enjoy that wonderful sight. Soon after leaving Sallanches, and more and more as one advances towards Saint-Gervais, Mont Blanc is hidden from sight. From Fayet, the real portal to its Empire, Mont Blanc is no longer visible; it is hidden by the chain of the Reposoir, the peaks of the Aiguille de Varens and the Desert de Platé. But, as Charles Durier said, " pitying Nature has been prodigal to Fayet-Saint-Gervais in compensations ". Three springs of thermal water, which thunder down in the gorge of the Bas-Nant, attract many invalids. The climate, milder than that of Chamonix, makes a stay here very pleasant to those who cannot bear severity of the mountain air. And the surrounding country offers an extraordinary variety of delightful

walks. It is indeed a veritable Paradise for pedestrians, who linger here indefinitely, enjoying the easy, luxurious life which recks not of mountains nor of savage Nature.

And it is just because Nature is too smiling and too accessible here, that the alpinist, leaving Fayet-Saint-Gervais behind him, prefers to push on to the heart of the mountain. For other summits besides that of Mont Blanc attract him; he longs to conquer all those etherial Aiguilles away up in the clouds, all those heights which dominate the valley of the Arve, those peaks which, as Guido Rey says " stand out clear against the sun like a dream city, surrounded by inaccessible walls, crowned by spires and steeples, gilded by many centuries of sun ".

Since the *Route des Alpes* was opened, Saint-Gervais has become one of the most important centres of that magnificent road; after crossing the wonderful Col des Aravis, the road leading directly to Evian branches off at Saint-Gervais from that to Chamonix, which we are now about to follow.

There is a difference of nearly 1640 feet in height between Fayet-Saint-Gervais and Chamonix. The Arve makes this descent towards the

On the way from Megève to Combloux.

Sallanches.

plain as an impetuous torrent; the electric railway makes the journey sometimes in tunnels through the rock, sometimes on impressive viaducts high above the stream.

Soon after passing Servoz, magnificent glimpses of the Aiguille du Goûter announce that we are approaching the Promised Land. And after passing through the Waterfall Tunnel, we finally come out into it.

The valley of Chamonix! What memories centre round that narrow piece of land, crushed between Mont Blanc and the Brévent, fifteen miles long from east to west. What charm and fascination it has exercised ever since those dim ages when Mont Blanc was referred to in early texts as *rupes quæ vocatur Albœ.*

And since it became better known, what homage has been paid this little Savoyard village, isolated from the rest of the world in the *campus munitus* from which it took its first name of *Chamouni* and its later administrative title of *Chamonix.*

Its origin is shrouded in mystery. All that one can be sure of, according to Charles Durier, is that long ago a people of Celtic origin lived in

Fayet St. Gervais. Park.

the shadow of the great mountain. A flat stone found near Saint-Gervais, bearing a Roman inscription and an exact date, leads us to believe that the valley of Chamonix knew a Gallo-Roman civilisation eighteen centuries ago. After that silence falls again till the XIth century. Then history commences. We know, by an Act of the time of Pope Urban II, that Count Aymar of Geneva conceded to the Priory founded by the Benedictines of Saint-Michel-de-Cluze " the whole district between the torrent of the Diosaz, Mont Blanc and the Col de Balme ".

In his *Guide to Chamonix and Mont Blanc*, Edward Whymper tells what happened in the following centuries, " the free-men who peopled this valley were treated little better than slaves ". These sturdy mountaineers did not lightly suffer this oppression. Two centuries after the gift of Aymar of Geneva, they rose and obtained a written acknowledgement of their rights. In 1519 the Priory of Chamonix passed into the hands of the College of the Church of Saint-Jacques at Sallanches. But the College does not seem to have troubled itself much about the people of Chamonix, except as regards the levying of taxes. Soon after

Sallanches. Gorge of Levaux.

St. Gervais, Chain of the Aravis.

1530 however, the inhabitants of Chamonix entered on an interminable struggle, sustained with the fierce obstinacy and indomitable energy characteristic of the highlander. This struggle, which went on for several centuries, led the authorities of the Priory, on the eve of the French Revolution, to set the people of Chamonix on a free and independent footing. It may be thought surprising to find such ideals of independence among obscure highlanders, isolated in a high-lying valley. The snow is really responsible for that; it covered up their pasturages for many months of the year and forced the natives to supplement their resources in some less ungrateful region. After a period of recovery we see the people of Chamonix beginning to seek their fortunes in France, in Germany and in Italy. They took situations abroad and they exported the produce of their valley; they established an important trade of honey and cheese, over the passes, the *Vacherins* of Savoy being already known and appreciated by Louis XIV.

In exchange for their services and their produce, they brought back not only money but ideas to their native valley. What chiefly struck the early visitors to Chamonix towards the middle of the XVIIIth century, was that there, where they expected to find nothing but ignorance and misery, they were met by knowledge and prosperity. It was thanks to the open and kindly character of its inhabitants, that Chamonix was able to welcome its first visitors without alarming them by its primitive austerity.

And Chamonix was not only able to offer hospitality to its visitors, it was able to furnish them with guides. Its sons who hunted the wild goat and the chamois had climbed the neighbouring heights thousands of times; its crystal-cutters had pushed their search to the very heights,

Le Fayet.

Servoz.

to which in many cases they had hewn out paths. Both huntsmen and seekers of precious stones appeared to the first visitors as men predestined to reveal the secrets of the mountain to them. The destiny of Chamonix, was about to fulfil itself; those reared on the mountain were about to conquer it. Moreover the mountain inspired its future conquerors with such deep affection, such passionate desire to learn its secrets that they set out prepared for any sacrifice.

Snow Flowers.

The first suitor to present himself was a young Englishman, twenty-three years of age, William Windham by name. He had stayed in Geneva in 1741 and been attracted by the " glaciers of Faucigny which he saw from the

Les Bossons.

Sunrise on the Chain of Mont Blanc.

shores of the Lake, shinning resplendent under a blue sky ". So he came to the Glacier, heedless of the dangers of which the prudent Genevans warned him and in spite of the " terrible description " he had been given. He took three days to get to Chamonix; on the fourth day, guided by peasants, huntsmen and crystal-cutters, he reached the lower part of the Tacul Glacier, afterwards called the *Mer de Glace* and after having spent half-an-hour on the ice, which he compared to a lake suddenly frozen over, he returned to Chamonix and Geneva, declaring his curiosity " perfectly satisfied ".

But in satisfying his own curiosity, Windham had excited that of his contemporaries. His account of what he had seen made a great sensation. But the influx of visitors did not begin at once. Windham had only been interested from curiosity; he lacked that enthusiasm of which apostles are made and which gives them the power of drawing multitudes after them. For the next twenty years the number of people who visited Chamonix was not great. But the time of revelation was at

hand. It was ushered in by the arrival of Horace Benedict de Saussure and Marc Theodore Bourrit. The first was a Professor at the Academy of Geneva; the second an artist and a singer in the Cathedral choir. Both were so eager to climb the mountain that it would have been difficult to say which was the most enthusiastic, had not Saussure himself declared : " M. Bourrit was even more determined than I was, on the conquest of Mont Blanc ".

Their enthusiasm was no passing fancy : they did not attempt the ascent of Mont Blanc as an excursion or for a wager; they attempted it simply because it attracted them, the one from scientific, the other from artistic reasons. For twenty-seven years Bourrit and Saussure tried to reach the summit by the most diverse routes. Public opinion followed the fortunes of the struggle and interested itself to such an extent, that on the morrow of the conquest, the name of Mont Blanc was on every tongue.

But the first visitors attracted by this definite victory did not go further than Montenvers, that wonderful terrace to which sovereigns, poets, writers, scholars and ordinary tourists, came to admire the moun-

In the Valley of Chamonix.

tain at close quarters. The prosperity of Montenvers soon became that which Bourrit desired for it. He presented a petition to the French Government, asking them to authorise the construction, on this rocky arête, which commands

Servoz. A Chapel.

a view over the Mer de Glace, of " a house to receive the learned men who came there and to contain the instruments necessary for the observation of these rare beauties of nature ".

By 1795 the building was finished and dedicated to Nature. Then Mont Blanc was visited by many famous men. Gœthe, accompanied by the Duke of Weimar, was there and he, too, was carried away by the magnificence of the view. It was on the evening of November 10th, that he entered the valley. " We saw in front of us above the mountains " he says " a light we could not explain... It seemed higher than the peaks... and gradually convinced us that it was the summit of Mont Blanc ".

Chateaubriand in his turn, came in 1805. He alone strikes a discordant note

De Saussure.

Mont Blanc from Geneva.

in the chorus of admiration. " Those ", he says, " who have seen diamonds, topazes and emeralds in the glaciers, have been more fortunate than I, my imagination has not been able to discover these treasures. As for the visitor to the valley of Chamonix, it is vain for him to expect a wonderful view. He sees, as if from the foot of a great shaft, a little piece of sky, blue and hard, without sunrise or sunset. It is depressing to stay at a place on which the sun only throws down one solitary ray at midday, over a barrier of ice ". This verdict remained unechoed and was severely criticized. " It is a pity ", said the *Album*, " that such wonderful descriptive talent should have been used to defame the Alps ".

Dumas, George Sand, Napoleon III, Tyndall, Pasteur were all attracted in their turn, some by curiosity, others in the interests of science.

In May 1868, Theophile Gautier, came to pay the homage of literature to Mont Blanc and wrote a beautiful description of his impressions on emerging from the valley of Magland : " Suddenly Mont Blanc came

in view and in that moment we experienced the sensation of Absolute Beauty, Grandeur and Sublimity. "

Contemporary literature has not only devoted articles to Mont Blanc but has used it as the background of its romances, as in *Alpe Homicide* and *Tartarin sur les Alpes*. Fashion — generally so capricious

La Flégère, an Interior.

and so changeable — seems for once to have kept faith : Mont Blanc remains in the fashion. To the ordinary tourist a visit to Chamonix is necessary for his self-respect; to the Alpinist Mont Blanc is a summit that must be climbed, and to the new school of acrobatic climbers, the Aiguilles of Mont Blanc are a consecration.

Nearly two centuries have passed since the day when that luminous snow-capped peak, high above the surrounding mountains, first signalled to its votaries. Fascinated by its attraction, they came to it and consecrated to it the greater part of their existence, some even sacrificed their lives. After the conquest of the summit, explorers were tempted by the Passes, then by the fantastic Aiguilles and finally by the " thin splinters of rock ".

On the way to La Flégère.

The art of conquering the great peaks has been evolved and developed according to the inaccessibility of the peaks attempted. Man's ingenuity has grown with his difficulties. " This is no longer the age ", says Guido Rey in his *Alpinisme Acrobatique*, " of the great ascents dear to the first Alpine climbers, those slow and solemn ascents in parties over vast ice-slopes up to the crowning heights. Those men climbed majestically with head erect... Today one climbs with hands and knees, one's body curved round a rock, one's feet oftener hanging in mid-air than resting on the ground ".

But what matters the position of the body so long as it clings to the rock? What matter the torn hands so long as they keep their hold? What matters frost-bite if the fingers do not lose their grip? These trifles pass unnoticed in the ardour of a great climb and are forgotten in the victorious return; glorious wounds which, in bearing witness to the hardness of the struggle, exalt the greatness of the victory.

Ever since Mont Blanc first cast its compelling shadow over the soul of the alpinist, he has been powerless to resist its appeal. In spite

of agonies of giddiness on precipitous rocks, he returns to the mountain: its attraction is irresistible.

That is why, submitting to the common fate of my comrades of the Alps, I have come back to Mont Blanc in this quiet autumn season.

The mountain seems more beautiful than ever, with its base of golden trees, pastures and red whortle-berries, which form, as it were, a velvet border of changing colours to its snowy dalmatic. Ungrateful man has deserted it! Everything is being shut up. But in spite of that, many expeditions are still practicable; many enchantments will still wield their spell on Mont Blanc before the beginning of the silent drama of winter.

Procession at Combloux.

The Valley of Chamonix.

CHAPTER II

The Valley

> For them too the meadows
> flower again and the golden
> harvest returns.
>
> Guido Rey.

One would need the exact and detailed observation of a Devambez to describe all the minute things which the Alpinist, high up on the Aiguilles, sees down below in the Lilliputian valley at his feet — the tiny houses so prettily set down on the bright green meadows, the little white winding tracks which connect the villages, the toy train, the thread-like windings of the Arve, the miniature trees grouped together in little woods, the almost imperceptible rust-coloured creatures moving about in tiny pastures of infantile dreams, with invisible bells whose sound rises up and echoes in the heights like the distant music of

dwarfs. And every colour, every shade is fresh and clear as if the artist had just laid down his brush. Everything speaks of order, harmony and prosperity.

Before the flood of tourists brought the necessary wealth to establish

Les Houches.

the people of Chamonix on a firm footing, they emigrated in order to earn money; that accomplished they returned to the shadow of the great peaks which called them home. They left Italy or France, without regret, to return to their own valley. And that notwithstanding the fact that they had tasted another civilisation, and seen the wonders of great cities.

Nothing made up for the glorious sunny days of this pure atmosphere, nor for the lovely spring days when the great snows, melting under warm breezes, trickle away down the slope in thousands of little streams,

Sainte-Marie. The Viaduct.

dancing and singing in the sunshine through larches and birch trees.

And moreover this valley is not poor. After a light spring breeze,

Near Chamonix.

innumerable fruit trees cast pink and white blossoms like showers of late snow, over gardens and meadows. In the honey season the air is busy with the hum of bees, carrying the spoil gathered from flowers which grow right up to the edge of the glaciers, back to their neat rows of hives. In the meadows and on the high pastures serene and placid cows crop the lush young grass; among the rocks goats leap about in the sunshine; barley and potatoes grow vigourously in the soil fertilised by the gifts of the glaciers.

For the earth here is truly hallowed, reclaimed by the age-long labour of the race, from mountain, flood and forest. Little by little throughout the centuries, the earth has been carried up on men's backs in great amphora-shaped baskets, to the rock terraces which offer the sunniest exposure. Every winter the snow carries it away down into the

The House of Jacques Balmat.

The Dôme du Goûter from a Chalet near Chamonix.

Aiguille du Midi.

hollow; every spring man, with the dogged perseverance of the highlander, refills his hod and carries it up again. The tourist will see no stranger sight than this — the ancestral toil by which the peasant, with slow and measured step, carries up on his back the hope of future harvests.

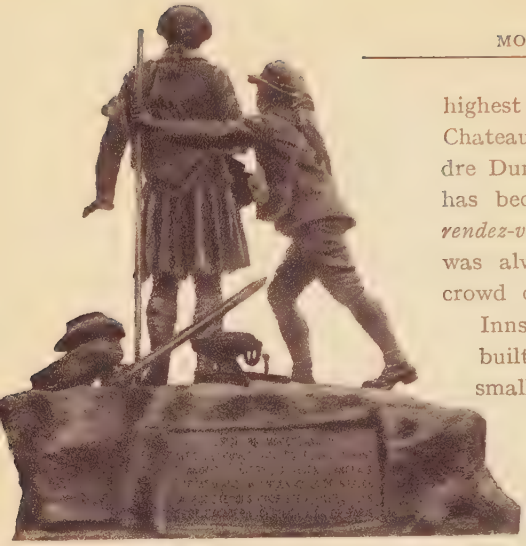
As for winter, when frost and bitter north-east wind proclaim enforced leisure, there follows a time of the pleasantest intimacy in the snowed up houses. The white flakes fall ceaselessly in this great peace; rocks and fences are hidden under a snowy mantle; silence reigns, broken only, now and then, by the muffled bells of the animals in the neighbouring stall. These are days of welcome peace, when the great deeds accomplished on the Aiguilles during the summer, are retold a hundred times; quiet evenings round the fireside, singing the folk-songs so characteristic of the alpine character, songs learnt, according to Guido Rey, " from the wind which whistles across the ravines and the torrent which roars down in the valley ".

Les Houches, the first *Commune* one comes to after crossing the Col de Voza from Saint-Gervais, is typical of the villages in the valley

of Chamonix. A small group of houses crowded round the white church, with outlying Chalets scattered over the slopes. Les Houches stands at the entrance to the valley. The country, wild and rugged up till then, suddenly becomes varied and smiling. Hamlet succeeds hamlet, all are picturesque and their names either suggest the character of the place or are derived from a neighbouring glacier, such as La Griaz, Le Pont, Le Cret, Vers-le-Nant, Taconnaz, Les Bossons.

The Aiguilles, a stormy night.

As for Chamonix itself, " there is perhaps no place in the world " to quote again from Guido Rey, " more beloved by travellers, writers and poets. It was the conquest of Mont Blanc that first made this little Savoyard village famous. Then a succession of great men came to meditate in the little white houses whose slate roofs shine out among the pines, men who were proud to talk to the simple peasant who had climbed the

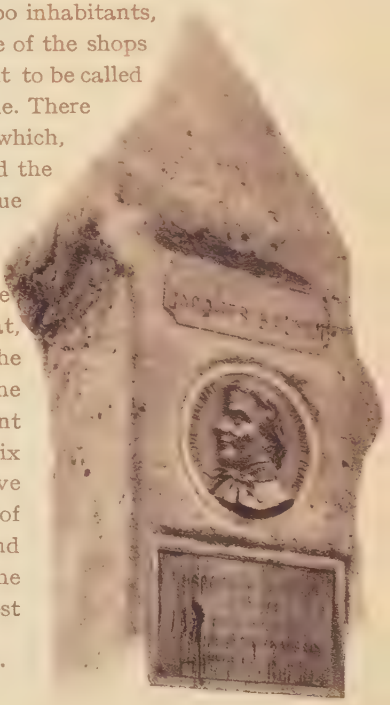


Saussure's Monument
" This is the way " !

highest summit in Europe, Byron and Shelley, Chateaubriand, Theophile Gautier and Alexandre Dumas... The little village of Chamonix has become a fashionable and cosmopolitan *rendez-vous* ". Curiously enough the old Priory was always too small for the ever-increasing crowd of visitors who came to it. The little Inns were too small in their turn. More were built. Often enlarged, they were still too small. Great palatial Hotels succeeded them with rows and rows of rooms, but even their innumerable windows are still insufficient for all who wish to look out on the chain of Mont Blanc.

Even though Chamonix is only the capital of a Canton of not more than 3000 inhabitants, its attractiveness and prosperity and the size of the shops which line its two principal streets, entitle it to be called a town. But a tour of the town is quickly made. There are only two chief streets, the *Rue Nationale,* which, like the valley, lies parallel with the Arve, and the *Avenue de la Gare* at right angles to the Rue National.

There are a few monuments to be seen. On the left bank of the Arve we find the statue of Horace de Saussure, and of Balmat, by Salmson of Geneva; the monument to the soldiers of the Great War by Verez, and the bust of Charles Durier, the historian of Mont Blanc. And the alpinist cannot be in Chamonix without paying homage to those who have lost their lives on the mountain. In front of the station and near the English Church we find the graves of Captain H. Arkwright, H. Rothe and L. R. Nettleship. And beside the modest



Medallion of Balmat.

Church the graves of Bean and Corkindale, the Russian Professor Fedchenko, Dr. Henri Broeckman, Abbé Gauthier and those of the guides, Savoye, Bron, Simond, Devouassoud. There is something

Aiguille du Dru from Prats.

strangely moving about these graves, this touching list of names...

If a few minutes suffice to see Chamonix, it would take months to see its surroundings. No town in the world lies in the centre of such a glorious crown of aiguilles, glaciers and snowy peaks.

The magnificent crystalline range of schist and granite heights which form the pinnacles of the Brévent and the Aiguilles Rouges,

Lake Cornu.

stretches along the right bank of the Arve. This tremendous rampart, over 9843 feet in height, would receive the awestruck admiration of the tourist in any other part of the world, but here, where everything is on such a gigantic scale, it is merely regarded as a terrace which affords a good view of Mont Blanc.

Facing it, on the left bank, the imposing mass of the Aiguilles and of Mont Blanc dwarfs everything else by its enormous expanse and its seven tongues of ice which flow right down to the valley of Chamonix.

What walks, what expeditions, what climbs one can make in these two parallel chains ! each as diverse in character as in length and difficulty.

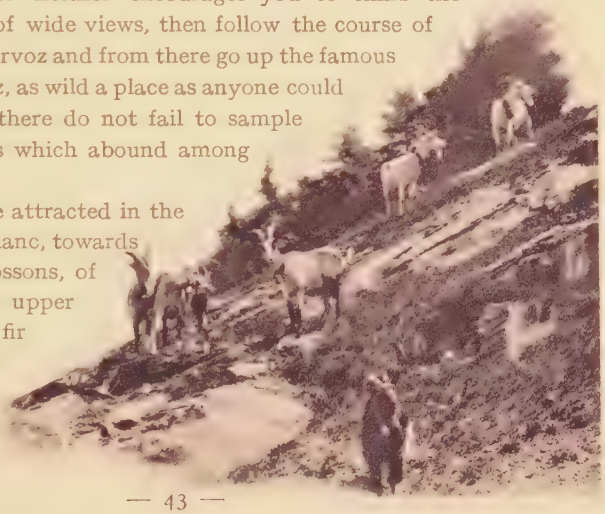
Spend one hour like this. Leave Chamonix by the path beside the Hotel Beau-Site and follow the road to Sallanches, between the gaily laid-out gardens and the flowery meadows. Wander peacefully along that road for half an hour and you will come to a bend in the river Arve. Behind a row of poplars, a clear and limpid sheet of water spreads out, reflecting the neighbouring mountains in its transparent depths. That is the Lac des Gaillards divided by a stony barrier into twin lakes which

The Chain of Mont Blanc.

have the charming coquetry to be utterly unlike each other, the one obscured by weeds and grasses, the other a pool of clear water sleeping peacefully over a bed of white sand.

If dull weather neither encourages you to climb the heights nor allows of wide views, then follow the course of the Arve as far as Servoz and from there go up the famous Gorge of the Diozaz, as wild a place as anyone could wish to see. While there do not fail to sample the famous lobsters which abound among these rocks.

Or you may be attracted in the direction of Mont Blanc, towards the Glacier des Bossons, of which one sees the upper part through the fir trees. In that case cross the Arve and go up past the



The Valley of Chamonix, Evening.

hamlets of Les Praz, Conduits, Les Barrats and Les Tissours to the forest. Following easy and clearly-marked paths you will come in about half-an-hour to the rapid torrent of Les Tissours. Soon after crossing it you will hear the dull roar of the waterfall of the Dard with its two falls of 42 and 165 feet respectively. Then a difficult choice lies before you — between Pierre Pointue with its wonderful view of Mont Blanc and the Glacier des Bossons. If you decide on the latter turn to the right towards Les Pèlerins, where, on entering the village you will pass the house of Jacques Balmat, the vanquisher of Mont Blanc. You can make your way back to Chamonix across the meadows, to the sound of the bells which cows and goats wear round their necks on broad leather collars.

There are innumerable excursions in the Brévent and the Aiguilles Rouges by winding paths between great fir trees. A wonderful two-hours walk, which will seem to you like two minutes, leads across the forest to the plain of Les Chablettes. To go to Planpraz, you take the path behind the little Church of Chamonix; climb

Sunset on Lake Champex.

for three hours up a beautiful and easy track and come out on the high pastures from which you have one of the most magnificent views of Mont Blanc, to the gay music of the bells of the flocks feeding peacefully in the valley.

There is a delightful walk, possible even to those not in training, in the valley of Chamonix itself. Behind the *Casino Municipale* there is a little wooded plain known as the Bouchet wood. It stretches away to the far-reaches of the Arve. Go there when sunset lights up the mountains, or when the morning mist lies over the Arve, those hours of changing lights and shadows for which Virgil seems to have written his beautiful line,

Majores que cadunt altis de montibus umbrae

The Bouchet wood extends as far as the village of Les Praz, prettily situated between the Arve and the Arveyron, that wild torrent which rushes down from the Mer de Glace. Is it because one sees the Aiguille du Dru through the fir trees, that it is now called the *Paradise des Praz?* This is the best place from which to watch the endless transformations

The Chain of Mont Blanc from the Brévent.

of the Dru. " This peak ", says Guido Rey, " is gifted with an almost magical power of transformation. Sometimes it looks like a delicate crystal to be kept in a glass case, sometimes like a gigantic obelisk set down in the sand of the desert. On a clear morning it is like a column of blue smoke rising straight up to the heavens; in the glow of sunset it appears as a jagged tongue of flame... In its transformations it is typical of the beauty of the Alps ".

Aiguille du Dru.

The little plain of Chamonix terminates about two miles from Praz, at the village of Les Tines, where a wilder and more wooded region begins.

The Arve cut a narrow passage for itself between the two rocky barriers and the eddies of its turbulent waters hollowed huge circular holes out of the rock, known as the *Marmites des Géants*. Struck by the resemblance between these cavities and a tub or cask, the natives called them *tines* from the Latin, *tina*. And the village afterwards took the name of the Gorge where these *tines* were found.

Beyond Les Tines the valley is narrowly shut in, the river, the railway and the road all dispute the right of way and sometimes cross

over each other. Then the valley opens out anew; we come to pastureland, varied by picturesquely situated woods; the glades and chalets recall those of Switzerland.

Soon we come to the higher part of the valley of Chamonix where, smiling in the sun and protected by the fir trees of the Aiguilles Rouges, lies the cheerful village of Argentière.

Argentière and the Aiguille de Floriaz.

Although Argentière is part of the Commune of Chamonix, there is some rivalry between the two places. Lying nearly 657 feet higher than Chamonix, Argentière has more sunshine, thanks to the breach of its great glacier which extends almost down to the station. Its climate, too, is drier than that of Chamonix, and it is the starting-point for many expeditions. Not to mention the big climbs to be made in the region of the Argentière Glacier, there are innumerable expeditions within the powers of the ordinary visitor. First among these is that of the Planet, one of the most beautiful terraces in the valley of Chamonix, with a wonderful view of the Aiguille Verte. And there are many delightful walks on the right bank of the Arve; among them we must mention that to Lake Cornu

which lies at a height of 7219 feet, in a situation of wild grandeur.

But the Flégère is of all others the classic expedition; it is more easily accomplished from Argentière than from Chamonix. The path starts beside the Hotel Couronne and ascends towards the south-west through the fir-trees. Between their trunks one catches magnificent glimpses of the neighbouring heights, the Glacier du Tour, Glacier d'Argentière, Aiguille d'Argentière, Aiguille du Chardonnet, Aiguille Verte and the Dru. Then, on emerging from the forest one has an extraordinary view over the basin of the Mer de Glace, the Aiguilles de Chamonix and Mont Blanc. One arrives presently, without fatigue, on a little plateau covered with pastureland beside the Aiguille de la Floriaz and the Hotel de la Flégère. Continue the ascent for two hours more, up a bridle-path across high pastures and you will be amply repaid for your trouble on arriving at Lake Blanc, which sleeps, half frozen over, 7723 feet high, at the foot of the Aiguilles Crochues. In this crystal-clear water, which comes from the Blanc Glacier, you will see the reflection of all the great snow-capped peaks of Mont Blanc.

The Church of Argentière.

If the village of Argentière is less favourably situated than Chamonix for the greater expeditions on Mont Blanc, it is a better centre for winter sports. In re-ascending the valley of the Arve towards the north, we soon come to La Tour, the last hamlet of the Commune of Chamonix, which lies 4695 feet high beside the Glacier of the same name.

Beyond that, high pastures extend as far as the Col de Balme, watered by the Arve which rises there. Innumerable flocks graze over these meadows, their bells sound clearly in the crisp air, big bells with deep solemn notes worn gravely by dignified cows who lead the flock, little high-toned bells worn by gaily prancing goats, the whole blended into a curiously charming music.

From the Col de Balme an immense panorama lies before us. Dumas declared that he was struck dumb by the beauty of that view and stood gazing at it, oblivious of the four degrees of frost. It was not to be wondered at, for he had all the giants of the French Alps in front of him, and towards Switzerland, the opening ont of a new fairyland.

The Col de Balme.

In sight of Mont Blanc.

CHAPTER III

The Way to the Heights.

> They arrive like Knights-Errant to conquer these fair Virgins, the Alps.
> Guido Rey.

Mont Blanc was at first merely a reef of sub marine rock, sleeping under the waters which covered the earth. Then it emerged, a modest island washed by the waves of the triassic sea. At the end of the Miocene Age it crumbled away. But in the depths a change was preparing. The dawn of the Pliocene Age saw the immense rock shoot up in a few seconds — or centuries, for a century is but a second in the succession of geological ages.

But the internal forces which had thrust this majestic edifice up to a height of over 16.000 feet, were exhausted; the duty of completing

The Seracs of the Géant Glacier.

the task devolved on atmospheric agents, who proceeded slowly, throughout the ages, to put the finishing touches.

The heat which continued throughout the Pliocene Age prevented the effects of erosion, which only reduced the gigantic pyramid by about 650 feet. But even that was too much, for its original form had to be preserved. And so the snows came to shelter it from destruction. At first the giant only carried a modest ermine mantle; its lower edge did not come further down than 9842 feet, for the mildness of the climate allowed larch woods and pasturelands to flourish as high as the place now called the Grands Mulets. That explains how, at the beginning of the world, Mont Blanc was nothing but a little snow-capped hill emerging above the trees.

Then the Quaternary Age arrived with its intense cold. The ermine mantle stretched out till it met the ice which extended south from the Pole. Then the temperature rose again. The glaciers were pushed back towards the heights. Under the gentle influence of soft breezes, the valleys decked themselves in green and on the mountain slopes, now cleared of

Alpine anemones.

snow, flowers hastened up in pursuit of the ice which fled towards the summits. But the frost kept watch on the heights under the celestial vault. Its grip held on that ermine mantle, and the jewel of the Alps lay safely in its casket of ice, in the form the convulsion of the earth had first given it. Mont Blanc had found its final altitude.

There is no doubt that it had then the form it has today . a formidable quadrangular pyramid of which the Northern face overlooks the Arve

The ascent of de Saussure (from an old engraving).

valley, while the other three faces are only visible from Italy.

When one looks at Mont Blanc from Chamonix, one sees the Glacier des Bossons, the foot of which comes nearly to the banks of the Arve, stretching out at the top into a sort of cradle of snow, enclosed between the Dôme du Goûter to the west and the line of rocks of the Grands Mulets to the East. This snowy valley reaches to just below the summit and it looks as if the ascent of this vast couloir would require nothing but patience. Towards the top it widens out into a large circle from which it appears as if one could gain either the *arête* to the west, which leads to the Aiguille du Goûter, or the *arête* to the east which connects Mont

The arena of Talèfre.

Maudit and the Aiguille du Midi. From below one would lay a wager that once on the *arête*, one could reach the summit in a stride.

How easy it all seems from the valley when one looks at the heights through field-glasses, seated in a comfortable arm-chair. And how many years it took, how many lives had to be sacrificed, before the different routes to the summit were definitely established.

The end of the XVIIIth century saw the beginning of the struggle between Man and the Mountain. Bourrit and de Saussure threw down the challenge, the one from love of Nature, the other from love of Science. " During my first attempts from Chamonix in 1760 and 1761 ", says de Saussure, " I sent notices to every parish in the valley, that I would give a handsome reward to whosoever found a practicable route to the summit ". This announcement led to the many attempts that were made in a heroic period which lasted for twenty-five years.

The first climbers attempted to go round Mont Blanc to the east, across the Glacier du Géant, not because that route seemed easier, but because that region was better known.

For many years the crystal-cutters had gone up by way of Montenvers and the Mer de Glace, to seek quartz in the Glacier de Talèfre at the foot of the Droites and the Courtes, and from there they had seen

The ascent of Mont Blanc.

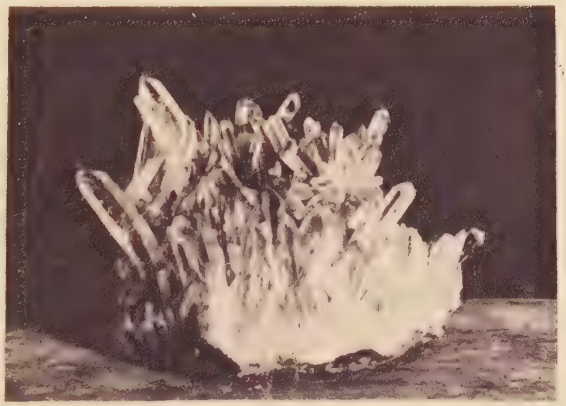
the summit which appeared to be quite near. They fell over each other in their attempts to reach the summit by Mont Maudit, but soon had to admit that Mont Blanc was inaccessible by that route.

They then concentrated on two routes: the western *arête* by the Col de Voza, Aiguille du Goûter and Dôme du Goûter, and the Bossons route which leads straight up without any interposing rock-barrier, an immense tongue of uninterrupted snow. More accustomed to climbing rocks than glaciers, the crystal-cutters and huntsmen tried to get up as far as they could by the rocks; they knew moreover, that the Glacier des Bossons was crossed by a vast and impassable ice-fall. That was why, in their first attempts, they climbed the rocky *arête* which separates the Glacier des Bossons from the Glacier de Taconnaz and is known as the Montagne de la Côte. In 1775 Michel and François Paccard, Victor Tissai and Couteran, climbed the left side of the Glacier des Bossons, as far as the summit of the Montagne de la Côte and succeeded in setting foot on the Glacier. They crossed the region of crevasses now known as La Jonction and got as far as the foot of the Dôme du Goûter. Pressed for time and not daring to spend the night on the Glacier, they could go no further and were forced to turn back. But their attempt was not in vain. They had discovered a route by which it was possible to reach the snowfield below the summit of Mont Blanc itself, that snowfield which extends from the Dôme and Mont Maudit and which soon came to be known as the Grand

The Glacier and Jardin of Talèfre.

Plateau. It still remained however to gain the final *arête* from that snowfield.

To push on in the direction of Mont Blanc was impossible, for the ice here reared itself into a formidable precipice over 2624 feet in height. But it appeared necessary to gain the *arête*, either from the left or from the right and to follow it towards the summit. The first route that appeared likely was by the depression in the *arête* to the west, between the Dôme du Goûter and Mont Blanc. But experience showed that it contracted more and more towards the summit and terminated to left and right in sheer precipices.



The eastern *arête* re-

mained. It seemed possible between Mont Maudit and the summit. For, to the left of the Grand Plateau the summit of Mont Blanc is supported by two lines of parallel rocks, the Rochers Rouges. A tongue of snow about 1640 feet long lies between these two rocky barriers and leads out onto the Grand Plateau.

Two men attempted to climb this ice couloir. One of them was not even a guide, merely a native who hunted chamois and looked for crystals. He was called Jacques Balmat and he was 25 years old. A Passport of the 18th Nivose, Year VII, describes him as 5 feet 3 inches in height — but if he had an " ordinary nose, small mouth and ordinary brow ", he had extra-ordinary energy. He and his comrades had already tried to reach the summit of Mont Blanc by the Glacier du Géant but the abysses of Mont Maudit on the eastern face had baffled them. Balmat had then attempted the southern face but had been brought up by the terrific slopes of the Glacier de Miage. He had renewed his attack by the western *arête* and the Dôme du Goûter but had been obliged to turn back before a storm on that ice *arête*. The northern face was the only one he had not explored. But one night darkness overtook him near the Grand

Mont Maudit from the Grand Plateau.

The Col of Mont Maudit.

Plateau and he was obliged to spend it there. Before descending next morning, he studied the towering walls around him; the Rochers Rouges did not appear to him too dismaying. He went down to Chamonix but told no one of his latest observations except a native doctor called Paccard.

The latter, a native of Chamonix, was 30 years old and like his contemporaries was obsessed by the desire of conquering Mont Blanc. He had already taken part in several expeditions. Like his friends he had made an attempt by the Géant, another by the Montagne de la Côte, a third by the Aiguille du Goûter. He now braced himself for a fourth attempt. It may be that eastern *arête* had already attracted him; like Balmat, it was the only one he had not yet tried.

On August 7, 1786, these two men, equally energetic and courageous, set out alone to try their luck on the North face. At four o'clock on the morning of the next day they reached the Glacier. From below the people of Chamonix watched them through their field-glasses and saw them disappear into the Grand Plateau. Anxiously throughout that long day

Mont Blanc from the Aiguille du Géant.

they watched and waited. Suddenly at 6.23 in the evening, they saw on the summit of Mont Blanc, two black specks, lost in the immensity of the heavens — Balmat and Paccard. The whole population of Chamonix paid them silent homage. The Rochers Rouges had proved surmountable. Mont Blanc was vanquished. With unspeakable emotion these two men heard their voices break the silence which, as Javelle said, " had reigned there since the beginning of the world ".

The very next day de Saussure, informed of their success, set out to follow in their footsteps. But rain and snow forced him to abandon the attempt. He was obliged to wait till the following summer. And in any case, he would only be second ! Mont Blanc had given the honours of conquest to two of its own sons.

The point of departure for Mont Blanc from Chamonix is near the monument erected to de Saussure, not far from the Hotel de la Poste. After ten minutes easy walking across the meadows, one comes to the edge of the forest, passing through Les Praz, Conduit, Les Buats and Les Tissours. Then the path begins to climb steeply up through pine-

On the summit of Mont Blanc.

trees. It crosses the Dard waterfall and rises by innumerable zig-zags through the larch trees which cover the slopes of the Aiguille du Midi. The path then leaves the forest behind it, also the gay and flowering country which reaches right up the mountain on both sides of the Glacier des Bossons. In three hours one reaches the chalet of Pierre Pointue, so-called because the ground around it is strewn by great pointed blocks of granite left behind by the Glacier in its retreat. There is a fine view from the Chalet : the Glacier des Bossons lies far below in majestic folds, forming immense crevasses which shew out in strong or delicate colouring according to the time of day. The bridle path stops here; one goes on by a narrow track, which becomes in places a corniche hollowed out of the rock and by which one gradually approaches the Glacier des Bossons. After climbing another 1312 feet one comes to Pierre à l'Échelle, the furthest extremity of the rock. Beyond that the domain of the Glacier begins and also the ascent proper of Mont Blanc.

From Pierre à l'Échelle one sees clearly, about a mile away, rising out of the glacier, the rocks of the Grands Mulets where the Chalet of

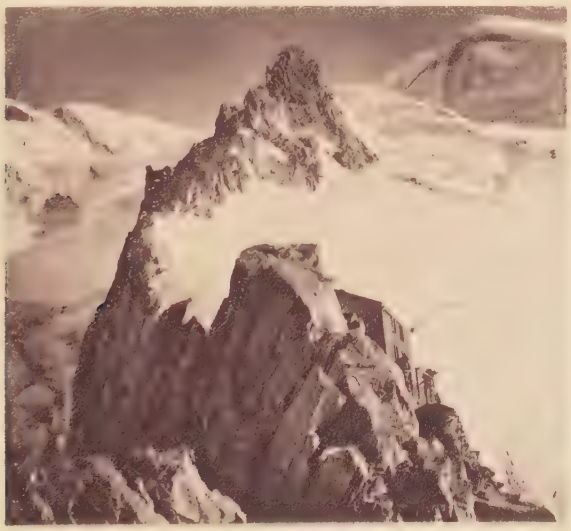
The valley of Chamonix from Pierre Pointue.

that name is to be found. That is the end of the first stage of the ascent. From there one cuts across the Glacier diagonally through the maze of crevasses. Soon one comes to the region properly called La Jonction because the Glacier de Taconnaz and the Glacier des Bossons meet there. In their impact, these two relentlessly moving glaciers throw up great masses of ice and form innumerable crevasses which one crosses on ladders. This is the most interesting part of the expedition for the ordinary tourist. He walks through a labyrinth of high ice walls, sometimes white, sometimes blue, sometimes green, occasionally gleaming with violet or mother of pearl lights, according as the sun strikes them. After passing through this labyrinth the going becomes easier, snow appears again and one sets out over that tongue of snow which leads to the edge of the rock on which the Hotel of the Grands Mulets stands.

This island of rock, emerging on the left side of the Upper Bossons Glacier, forms the threshold of that prodigious ice-couloir which leads, across silent and deserted wastes, right up to the summit of Mont Blanc. Grands Mulets was originally merely a flattish terrace situated on this

rocky buttress, lying over 10.000 feet high at the foot of the Aiguille Pitchner. It was sheltered from avalanches and so the guides found it a suitable place to spend the night. In 1886 the terrace was improved and a Chalet was built which in 1896 owing to the great number of tourists, had to give place to a big Hotel. Since then the Grands Mulets has gained the reputation of being one of the most magnificent view-points of the Alps. No title was ever better deserved. This region, can, according to the caprice of the weather, be either a Paradise or an Inferno. In good weather it is a slow ascent across fields of dazzling snow, a journey through a veritable dream country where the white is so white that a lily would look grimy beside it, the blue so intense that the sky seems black in comparison. But in bad weather the climber has a fearful and depressing task; the wind knocks him down, the snow blinds him; through the white obscurity of the tempest he catches disquieting glimpses of the crevasses which surround him and crowd in upon him, like open mouths ready to swallow him up.

On leaving the Chalet one goes at first towards the Dôme du Goûter beside the ice-wall which extends along the Pitchner rocks to the foot



The Hotel of the Grands Mulets.

of the northern *arête* of the Dôme. Then one strikes off resolutely and by way of the Petites Montées reaches the Petit Plateau, a small gently inclined plain at a height of about 11,925 feet with the seracs of the Dôme glittering above it. It is an extraordinarily fascinating sight, but one should not be tempted to go too near because the seracs sometimes break off into considerable avalanches and woe to the tourist who finds himself in their way ! In order to avoid this danger it is best to keep well away from the Dôme and follow a long slope known as the Grande Montée which leads to the Plateau, a vast snowfield about 1 kilometre square whose average slope never exceeds 8 degrees. Owing to the prevailing mists and storms, this is one of the most difficult parts of the climb. Many alpinists have mistaken their way on the Plateau, lost in this melancholy arena surrounded by towering heights — to the right the Dôme du Goûter, to the left Mont Maudit, in front the immense wall of Mont Blanc. Profound silence reigns in this frozen plain, broken only from time to time by the roar of the avalanches or the hollow cracks of the glaciers. Even on his first ascent, de Saussure was disagreeably impressed by the forbidding aspect of this place. " One sees no living creature,

The Seracs of Mont Blanc.

Mont Blanc from the Valley of Ferret.

Grands Mulets.

no sign of vegetation, in this abode of frost and silence. When I think of Balmat and Dr. Paccard, the first human beings to visit this place, arriving towards evening in this desert, with no shelter, no help, not even any certitude as to whether man could live in the regions they intended to visit. — I cannot sufficiently admire their strength of mind and their courage ". Thinking of these first pioneers of the Alps, one may well say with Horace.

Illi robur et aes triplex
Circa pectus erat....

From the Grand Plateau, three routes are open to the climber. To the extreme left, between the precipitous walls of the Rochers Rouges and Mont Maudit, a deep, narrow valley opens up, full of soft, powdery snow in which one sinks up to one's knees and which covers many dangerous crevasses. This is the Corridor. It terminates in the Col de la Brenva above the famous cliffs of that name. From there one can reach the Mur de la Côte, a hill of ice, about 200 feet high and with a slope of

Crossing the Jonction.

50 degrees. This wall once crossed one follows the eastern *arête* of Mont Blanc towards the summit by the Petits Rochers Rouges and the Petits Mulets; a gentle slope then leads to the summit, 15,782 feet high.

The second route is the earliest one, that which Balmat and Paccard followed. It goes by the right flank of the Rochers Rouges.

But the most frequented route is that by the Col du Dôme which faces one on arriving at the Grand Plateau. It offers no difficulties and is the safest way.

At the Col of the Dôme du Goûter, the route from Chamonix joins that from Saint Gervais by the Aiguille du Goûter. Not far from there a little flat rock emerges, nearly level with the snow. For many years the guides thought of erecting a shelter there but nothing came of it. In 1890, M. Jacques Vallot had a modest little wooden hut built there; in 1893 he enlarged that primitive Hut and had a Refuge for climbers built on the nearest rock. Thanks to his initiative there are now two roofs braving wind and weather and offering hospitality to the climber in that terrifying waste.

The Route des Bosses, the final stage of the climb by the western *arête* starts from the Vallot Refuge. That was where the guides of de Saussure and Bourrit stayed when they attempted the ascent of Mont Blanc from Saint Gervais.

The Grand Plateau and Les Bosses.

At the present time the route from Saint Gervais, which was the last to be discovered, seems about to become the most frequented, thanks to the construction of the electric railway. The latter follows the valley of Montjoie, the Col de Voza and Mont Lachat to the neighbourhood of the great Bionnassay Glacier. From the terminus one can reach the Chalet on the Tête Rousse in two hours; another two hours easy climbing and one is on the summit of the Aiguille du Goûter; an hour and three quarters more takes one easily to the Vallot Refuge which is only an hour and a quarter from the summit. So that seven hours actually suffices to reach the goal which defeated the efforts of the first climbers for 25 years.

The plateau of the Tête Rousse was a resting place long before there was a Hotel there. Did de Saussure have a stone hut built after

The Italian face; the slopes of the Brenva.

1785 when he spent the night of September 14 there? That wonderful night, made a deep impression on his mind. " The evening mist ", he said, " which tempered the heat of the sun like a gauze veil and half obscured the immense expanse which lay at our feet, formed a purple band round the whole western region of the horizon. To the East, the snows at the foot of Mont Blanc, coloured by that light, presented a strange and striking spectacle ". Night fell and de Saussure was impressed by " the profound silence which reigned in these vast spaces, magnified by the imagination ".

Today a comfortable Hotel welcomes the visitor who spends the night there before attempting the ascent. He starts early next morning, for he must have climbed the Aiguille du Goûter before the sun has loosened the avalanches of stones. This ascent really offers no danger except from falling stones. A hut on the highest plateau of the Aiguille allows of a welcome halt; then follows the climb up the great slopes of the Dôme du Goûter, leaving its magnificent seracs on the left, while on the right the imposing Aiguille de Bionnassay seems to soar out of

A scientific expedition arriving at the Vallot Refuge.

the ground with its delicate etherial *arête* and its formidable ice cornice. The Col du Dôme is soon reached, that Pass which of all the Passes of the Alps seems to be the most tormented by clouds and hurricanes. Here one rejoins the route which comes up from Les Bossons and the ascent of the Bosses begins, that gigantic staircase hanging precipitously over the Glacier de Miage, and dangerous in high winds. The crest appears to grow gradually larger as the gradient diminishes and one arrives

The Vallot Refuge.

without further trouble on the rounded summit of the highest peak of the Alps.

Another way of ascending Mont Blanc is to start from Courmayeur and follow the course of the Doire in the direction of the Col de la Seigne and Lake Coumbal. The path then leads up on to the Glacier de Miage along the left side of the spurs of Mont du Brouillard; it finally crosses the base of the most southerly affluent of the Glacier de Miage known as the Glacier du Mont Blanc, and rejoins the route from Saint Gervais south-east of La Tourette and not far from Les Bosses.

The Aiguille and the Glacier of Bionnassay.

From this side one can vary the route in many ways, according to the season and the year and the caprices of the ice. For the glacier *is* capricious and its movement must perpetually change the routes and the aspect of the mountain below the summit.

The summit alone appears eternal and unchangeable, just as it appeared at the close of the Quaternary Age, defying the elements, the Ages and the hand of Man. Immutable in the heavens, that ice cupola has shone out, infinitely pure, right down the centuries. Man once tried to leave his mark on the mountain ; he attempted to raise the icy summit a few feet by a miserable wooden hut, erected with great labour, in which he wished to shelter his scientific instruments during the winter. In order to ensure the stability of his erection, he wished to bore down to the rock which the snows had hidden from the eyes of man since the end of the Pliocene Age. But the snow refused to part with its secret ! Then man ingeniously made his erection fast to the ice itself. Imperceptibly in a few years, the ice anchor began to drift, the whole erection moved towards the abyss. Man was forced sadly to remove it before the

Aiguille de Bionnassay from the arête of the Bosses.

Scientific expedition climbing the Dôme du Goûter.

glacier below swallowed it up. The snow had gently shaken off the impertinence and the summit had returned to the altitude the united forces of Nature had given it in the dim ages.

As to the panorama from Mont Blanc — what can one say of it? To enumerate the summits which surround it would be wearisome; in any case one can look them up in an Atlas. And what purpose is served by naming the hundreds of peaks visible on the horizon? The eye cannot grasp them all; the individual mountains, are mere details in

Mont Blanc from Courmayeur.

this sea of heights in which all the Alps surge up in foaming billows — to the North, the Bernese Oberland; to the East the Giants of Valais; to the South the mountains of Piedmont. As for the great French Alps, Oisans, Maurienne, Tarentaise, how carefully one has to search the horizon to distinguish these peaks, so immense and so familiar from near at hand, so minute from this altitude! In those summits which do emerge, and which crowd round the central Colossus, many stir up dim memories deeply buried under the ashes of the past, many more awaken new ambitions, new lusts of conquest!

Looking down we see the fascinating but dangerous routes into Italy. There are many exciting descents to be made among the formidable precipices of the Brenva. Mont Blanc de Courmayeur lies about an hour's distance from this summit, with its sheer plunge down onto the Italian side. That is the way to go down if one wishes to experience all the agonies of death, but only if one is a mountaineer of the first class. Who could imagine, on looking at the tremendous cliffs above the Glacier of the Brenva and along the Aiguilles de Peuteret that any one

could pass that way? And yet since 1863, intrepid climbers have not hesitated to make that arduous climb. It terminates, as one might expect from its aspect, in an *arête* so narrow that there is no room for one's feet and one has to drag oneself across astride. That route is better marked out now, but it still has its dangers, the chief of which is the falling of seracs.

Other and less perilous routes lead to Italy. One which might almost be called international, follows the eastern *arête* of Mont Blanc and by the Petits Mulets, the Mur de la Côte, Mont Maudit and the snowy slopes of Mont Blanc de Tacul, leads to the Refuge of the Col de l'Aiguille du Midi. From there one can descend quite easily by the snowy valley and the Upper Glacier du Géant to the Col of the same name and thence to Courmayeur by Mont Frety.

The Jansen observatory.

The village and Glacier of Argentière.

CHAPTER IV

In the Nave of Argentière.

> And you, ye Mountains,
> Why are ye beautiful ?
> BYRON, *Manfred, I., ii.*

I am not one of those who regard the mountains as a race-course to be rushed through at the gallop. I belong, on the contrary, to that school of alpinists, who, finding it impossible to tear themselves away from the mountains, delight in wandering indefinitely over the sparkling glaciers, sunning themselves luxuriously on the rocky heights.

That is why on this crisp Autumn morning, I set out in leisurely fashion towards the Glacier of Argentière. Everything was still asleep in the village; the empty road was lined by Hotels which looked out on a deserted station. The path I followed was still and silent. Beyond the Church with its sleeping bells, lay the old village. There I heard a sound

from the stables : a mule, tied to the door, stood patiently being saddled; a dog greeted me with some secret animosity as I left the village and emerged on to the dewy meadows. After crossing the railway, I entered a sparse pine forest strewn with rocks and thick with morning mists. The bridle path turned off to the right towards the moraine and on crossing the wooden bridge over the roaring torrent, the spray dashed up in my face and banished the last vestiges of sleep which still dulled my brain. High up above me on a little crest, hardly visible through the mists of sunrise. I saw the Chalet of Lognan.

On the Glacier of Argentière, Mont Dolent in the distance.

Beyond the bridge the path divides. To the left it leads to the foot of the glacier which one sees dimly ahead, a bluish mass in the greyness of the dawn. To the right one reaches the moraine up a slope covered with sparse vegetation which becomes more luxuriant as one ascends. Dwarf trees, rich in autumn tints, patches of grass covered with delicate flowers and moss roses, brighten up this rocky region. I soon came to a forest of spare and venerable pine-trees, their branches broken by avalanches, the whole wood wasted by the hand of time. The path wound up and up under the silent heights, while the valley

seemed to sink slowly away beneath my feet. Then the forest was lightened by twisted larches which seemed to grow with difficulty in this sub-alpine zone, sheltering some scanty bushes beneath them. Through their branches I saw immense snow-covered heights, motionless as if in prayer,

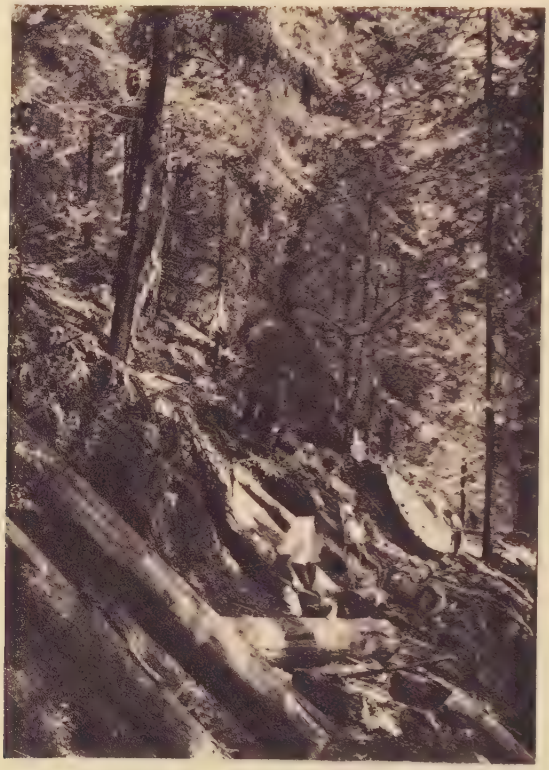
The arête of Chardonnet, looking towards the Verte and Mont Blanc.

towering above me in the calm solemnity of the morning. But the trees and the incessant windings of the path soon hid them again and the path wound up and up through the poor and rocky pastureland which succeeded the scrub.

I now saw the Chalet of Lognan distinctly in the distance and as the rising sun threw a golden streak across the mountains, I made out the immense seracs of the Glacier of Argentière, frozen into the strangest attitudes of supplication.

The last stretch of the Glacier's course lies through a steep, narrow channel, so narrow that it causes the absolute dislocation of the whole mass. It thrusts up immense obelisks of the most unexpected shapes; bluish pyramids supporting cubes of ice like great lifeless heads; slender

towers capped with snow; long twisted prisms with phosphorescent and mysterious lights playing through and between them; a whole family of frozen Aiguilles, travelling slowly and irresistibly towards the foot of the valley.



Woodculters at work.

The symmetrical outline of the Chalet of Lognan stands out against this strange background. There are several small houses beside the Hotel and some rough shelters under the rocks. The bridle-path stops here. A well marked track continues along the top of the moraine, between blocks of granite. The crest becomes narrower and rises about 60 feet

Argentière and the Dôme du Goûter.

Glacier and Aiguille of Argentière.

above the seracs on the left; the patches of grass gradually disappear. Looking back one sees the snowy peak of the Buet, while in front the vast glacier lies glittering in the sun, surrounded by high cliffs and dominated by the overhanging glaciers of the Aiguille Verte. One is here on the threshold of the most beautiful and most striking Glacier of the Alps.

For the Glacier of Argentière is rearly 7 miles long; it follows an absolutely straight course and is remarkable for its harmonious symmetry. The heights which surround it balance each other and face each other across the Glacier. It has been well compared by M. E. A. Martel to " one of those majestic ruined naves, whose vaults and arches have given way, whose pillars only remain. It is simple, uniform and impressive, like some grand Gothic pile ".

To reach the choir of this immense Cathedral — which has the sky for roof, Mont Dolent and the Aiguille du Triolet for apse, and a transept over 14,000 feet in extent between the Aiguille Verte and the Aiguille du Chardonnet — one ascends the most magnificent ivory steps imagination can picture. Beyond the seracs of Lognan, the Glacier rises over 5000 feet in a gentle slope, scored by parallel, regularly-spaced cre-

Glacier of Argentière, Mont Dolent and Triolet in the distance.

vasses, which mark the walls of ice so evenly and are so exactly laid the one on the top of the other, that one has the impression of a long flight of ivory steps, shaded here and there with blue. It is a veritable titanic staircase, leading up to a temple of absolute silence, where an immense polar Lake lies between fantastic battlements of glittering ice.

When, after having climbed up the left bank, one is parallel with the Aiguille du Chardonnet, one sees the Glacier, now almost flat, lying at the foot of the cliffs. The immense heights on the left are known as the Droites and the Courtes. Rather than seek an impossible route through the couloirs which honey-comb the rock, it is better for the climber of average strength to keep to the right side of the Glacier and make towards the *arête* of the Aiguille of Argentière. For to the south of the Glacier of Chardonnet, he will find the Refuge of the Glacier d'Argentière. It stands at a height of 9258 feet, not far from the source of the Moraine des Amethysts and gives a fine view over the whole Glacier.

What strikes one immediately, is, that contrary to the usual habit of glaciers, that of the Jardin of Argentière has neither winding nor tributary. This gigantic arena has no outlet. The tremendous heights

which surround it, cut up by savage couloirs or flanked by rocks, terminate in jagged battlements, armed with granite lances.

One should try to spend a night at the Refuge during full moon. All around this wonderful arena, great heights, shattered by some terrific cataclysm, sleep in funereal silence. The unspeakable grandeur of such a night is mixed with horror, for the moonlight throws the black shadows of the Aiguilles on the ice, while the couloirs, full of deep impenetrable shadows, seem to conceal fearful and terrifying demons.

Such surroundings could not be found anywhere else. Looking round the immense circumference of this arena from Lognan, that is to say from the North, one is at once struck by an *arête* cut out like the tooth of a saw, which culminates at a height of 13,540 feet in an immense dome of dark green ice from which it takes its name, the Aiguille Verte. From the summit, the *arête* slopes gently down and stretches out into one of the most imposing ramparts of the Alps. The chief heights are the famous Droites and Courtes; a little further to the south-east is a cylindrical rock called the Tour des Courtes about 12,112 feet high. Beyond

Aiguille Verte, the Droites and the Courtes; Mont Blanc in the background.

An unparalleled crescendo; the Courtes, the Droites and the Verte.

The Verte, the Droites and the Courtes from the Glacier of the Tour Noir.

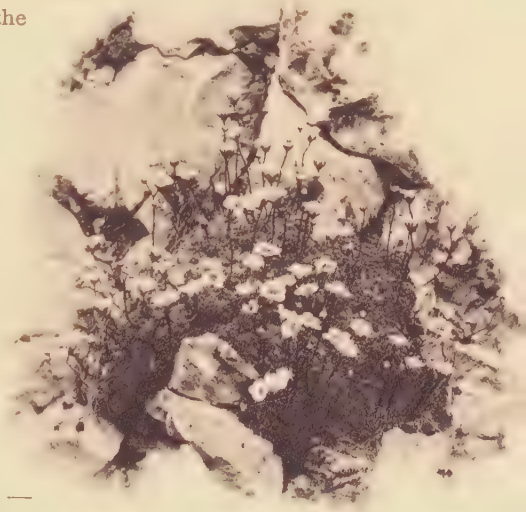
that the *arête* dips down to rise again in a " cone of black rocks encased in grayish ice and with fearful precipices ", known as the Aiguille du Triolet by alpinists who have a wholesome respect for its steep and splintering rocks. What M. Martel calls a " bizarre rampart " extends from this Aiguille, a wall of such precipitous cliffs that snow cannot lie on it. This forms the apse of the immense Cathedral. Adjoining the Aiguille de Triolet on the right, it ends on the left in a graceful cone of snow which lends an air of austerity to the far side of the Glacier of Argentière. This cone is called Mont Dolent and is the boundary of a triple frontier, that of France, Switzerland and Italy.

Was it because the somewhat roguish beauty of this white pyramid suffers from comparison with its savage surroundings, that it was so called? Because its delicate lines seem to bemoan their proximity to these awful heights and depths? But after all, *is* it really doleful, this proud and graceful mountain, its snow-cap surrounded by giddy couloirs and its rugged granite sides encased in cruel slopes of ice? Its clean slender lines certainly seem out of place in that " formidable chain which rises

Summit of the Tour Noir, looking into Switzerland.

in an unparalleled crescendo from the Courtes and the Droites to the Aiguille Verte ".

Between the Aiguille du Triolet and Mont Dolent there is a snow-filled ravine which leads down into a considerable depression beyond which the sunny skies of Italy are to be seen : " It is the very ideal of a Pass ", said Whymper, who crossed it while looking in this region for a Pass comparable to the Col du Géant.



After Mont Dolent, which closes the Glacier of Argentière to the South-East, the ridge turns suddenly towards the North-West, forming a magnificent wall known as the Rochers Rouges of Argentière, a terrible *arête* crowned by jagged peaks at a height of 12,109 feet. In savage beauty

this range cedes nothing to the Droites or the Aiguille Verte. Then the *arête* falls about 650 feet to form the Col of Argentière. To the left of the Col, and commanding it, stands an imposing peak. Javelle

The Verte and the Droites from the Col d'Argentière.

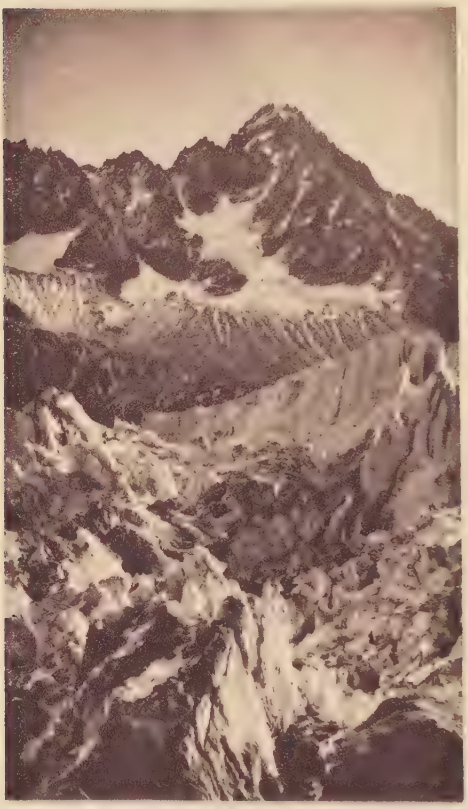
who was the first to climb it called it the Tour Noir — " a shapeless, heavy tower about 650 high, set down in all its incalculable weight, on the Glacier of Argentière. Having climbed as far as the Col by the slope of the Glacier de la Neuvaz, Javelle crossed the western face of the Aiguille on a narrow cornice and thus reached the *arête*. " Then ", he wrote, " then began a real feat of aerial gymnastics, a giddy climb like that of the spires of Strasbourg Cathedral. Then came those thrilling

moments when, suspended 3280 feet above the abyss, one held on by the tips of one's fingers and the toes of one's boots to the inequalities of the granite... from time to time one looked down between one's feet

Aiguille du Géant from Charmoz.

or over one's shoulder, into the depths... The indescribable joy of these moments "!

Beside the Tête Noire and but slightly higher, rises the magnificent Aiguille of Argentière. In that incomparable Cathedral — which would easily contain all those built by the genius of man throughout the centuries — there must be a suitable organ; the Aiguille of Argentière, standing in the left transept, forms that organ, with its beautiful slender



Aiguille du Chardonnet.

pillars, grouped in clusters like immense organ pipes. Standing behind the Glaciers of Saleinaz and Argentière, it balances the mass of the Droites.

An interesting climb, the Aiguille of Argentière does not itself present any danger to the alpinist; avalanches and falling stones are more to be feared. The only risks are of a subjective nature and spring from the natural obstacles met with in every considerable mountain. The rock couloirs demand some facility in climbing but the ice-slopes are possible and the crevasses easily crossed. One must not, all the same, neglect the precautions usual to big ascents. After his first attempt Whymper, accompanied by Reilly and his guides Croz and Couttet, was climbing a slope of frozen snow which seemed to all appearances solid and secure. But stamping on the crust of ice to warm his feet, Whymper suddenly kicked a hole and heard a sound underneath him like falling glass. He saw at once that he and all the party on his rope had stopped over an ice cavern " covered over by a thin vault of snow from which great stalactites hung down... The whole party might fall through at any moment. " Go higher up, Croz, we are over a crevasse ", I said. " We know ", Croz replied. And my friend asked in a quiet voice if we were not doing what was called " tempting Provid-

dence! The answer was in the affirmative ".

The wonderful view from the top of the Aiguille embraces the whole Alpine system : Pennine, Bernese, Chablais and Bas-Valais; nearer at hand Mont Dolent, Tour Noir, Aiguille of Argentière, while the ramparts of the Droites and Courtes make a formidable foreground.

Beside the Aiguille of Argentière and in the same range, rises the Aiguille du Chardonnet ; a Pass, well known to average climbers separates the two summits.

While climbing up the Glacier du Chardonnet as far as the Col, one has time to examine the curious southern face of the Aiguille. It is covered with little rocky pyramids arranged one above the other in steps and bristling with granite points which have been compared to crystallization on a large scale, formed like the little towers of an immense pagoda. Towards Argentière the rocky crest descends north-west in a steep slope, terminating in precipices on the lowest part of the Glacier of Argentière, crowded with these white forms, which in the clear morning air look like figures frozen in everlasting prayer.

Glacier of Argentière · the Droites and the Courtes.

In the peace of a lovely Autumn afternoon, I went regretfully down these crystal steps, the sole traces now remaining intact of that great

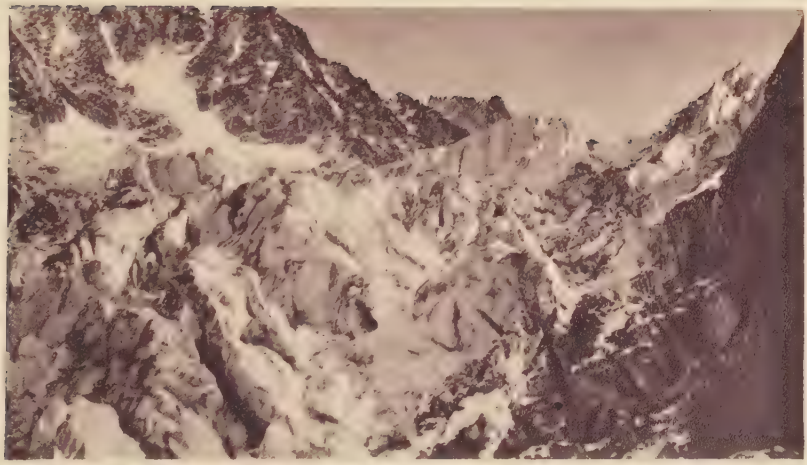
ruined Gothic Cathedral. Under the hot sun the stones rumbled away down into the depths, the seracs melted and fell away with a hollow roar, the waterfalls leapt thundering to the plain, while all the time one heard the curious almost imperceptible crepitous sound of water dropping into the hollows and sinuosities of the ice.

I went down to Lognan by the winding path over the moraine, across burnt grass strewn with boulders. The whole place was deserted, the pasturage empty and silent; the larches were tipped with gold; little rivulets danced and sang between their roots, and the flies hummed joyously. The whortleberry leaves were purple like those of their sisters the vines, for the whortleberry is the vine of the mountains. It was the time of the vintage: a group of blackbird harvesters, scolding and disputing among themselves had settled on the bushes which reached in successive terraces right down to the glacier which one saw appearing far below. The noise of my footsteps disturbed them in their pleasant occupation; they flew away in alarm and swept down towards the blue ice. The air was full of the scent of fir-trees. The whole mountain exulted in the last rays of the setting sun,

The Couvercle and the Aiguille de Talèfre.

while the mist from the river was already creeping up the valley.

If after death, our souls change their outer covering, I shall ask a kind Providence to let me be a blackbird of the Lognan woods. But I will not be afraid of the alpinist, nor of the sound of his hob-nailed boots or his alpenstock on the granite path. Hidden by the leaves, I will watch him with my bright black eyes, I will fly with him invisibly from bush to bush as far as the top of the thicket, remembering that in another existence I too went up and walked between the half broken pillars of the great Cathedral.



Seracs of the Glacier of Argentière.

Montenvers and the Aiguille du Dru.

The Mer de Glace.

CHAPTER V

In the Temple of Giants

> This petulant little stone seems to mock at us and say, " I can be wicked too ! Wait and see ! "
>
> Guido Rey.

I was thinking today of the companion of my big climbs. But for him I should never have attained these dream cities he and I longed to visit together. In September 1906, a mutual friend took him a message from me, delivered at the foot of the Aiguilles d'Arves — my sorrow that I was prevented from being with him. And from there, where Death already lay in wait for him, my comrade of the Alps sent me a word of consolation : " Tell him we will climb the Aiguilles of Chamonix

Crossing the Mer de Glace.

together next year ! " But alas ! he carried his promise with him to the foot of the crevasse...

Though without his bodily presence, my thoughts were with him today in the immense Glacier du Géant with its gigantic obelisks, bastions and crests which he would have loved to climb.

The Montenvers railway had taken me along past the Planaz buttresses, through the Grépon tunnel, across the slopes of Charmoz and over that imposing viaduct above the Glacier des Bois. I had arrived on the terrace of Montenvers, and looking out on that wonderful view, I understood how even Chateaubriand had been unable to resist its fascination.

" Imagine a valley ", he said, " of which the foot is entirely filled by a river. The mountains which enclose this valley form a towering mass of heights above the river, the Aiguilles of Dru, Bochard and Charmoz. Further up, the valley and its river divide into two branches, one leads to the Col du Géant, the other to the heights of the Jorasses. At the other end of the valley is a slope, looking down the valley of Chamonix. This slope, which is extremely steep, is partly filled by the Glacier des

Bois. Suppose a severe winter; the river which fills the foot of the valley, its windings and its tributaries, has been frozen solid to the foot of its bed; the tops of the neighbouring mountains are covered with snow

Crossing the Mer de Glace.

wherever the granite slopes are sufficiently horizontal to retain it — there you have the Mer de Glace and its surroundings... When one is actually on the Mer de Glace, the surface which appears from Montenvers to be solid, is found to be a succession of heights and valleys : the heights imitate the shape and ruggedness of the peaks which tower above on every side, the Glacier in fact resembles a marble relief of the mountains ".

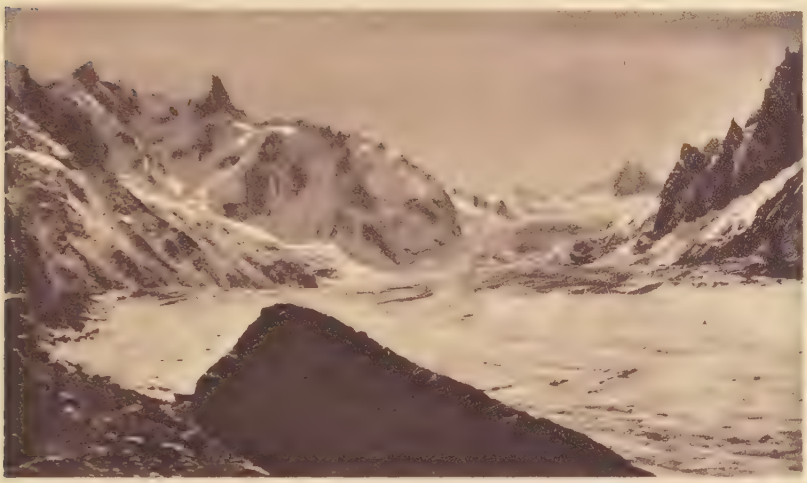
This great writer could see nothing but the Glaciers : they alone were fashionable in his day. But now visitors divide their admiration

between the frozen river and the Aiguilles which rear their impressive heights all round Montenvers.

" Everything one sees from here is pointed ", says Guido Rey, speaking of the view from Montenvers towards the Aiguilles. " Everythings eems in confusion, thrown up by some terrible convulsion. These peaks date from prehistoric times and give one a good and complete idea of a whole prehistoric age. This is the most extensive fragment of the early world which remains in Europe to remind us of the Ice-Age... "

Even the ordinary tourist can easily go to the foot of these great peaks. From Montenvers one can go by the delightful path to the Plan des Aiguilles which leads first to Pierre Pointue along the grassy heights which look down on the valley of Chamonix. The path winds picturesquely along the edge of that magnificent terrace to which the glaciers of Charmoz, la Blaitière and the Plan extend. A slight détour allows the tourist to walk along the shores of Lake du Plan, that clear mirror left by some nymph on these glorious heights where the Glacier of

Mer de Glace, Montenvers and the Aiguilles de Chamonix from the Chapeau.



Dent and Cirque du Géant.

the Pélerins, the Blaitière and the Nantillons sleep so peacefully.

The Aiguille du Dru is the glory of Montenvers, that magnificent tapering peak which, on the opposite side of the valley rises in giddy precipices to a height of 6562 feet above the Glacier. Its name " seems to mean a malicious, deformed dwarf ". The Glacier at its feet has an equally strange name, *La Charpoua*. One spends the night there before climbing the Dru.

The Glacier du Géant peacefully unrolls its river of ice along the foot of the highest escarpment of the Alps. It lies, solemn and majestic between the imposing heights of the Dru and the Aiguille du Moine to the East, and the chain of the Charmoz to the West. On leaving Montenvers one goes up a path on the left bank of the Glacier, which runs along the very edge of its rocky slopes and is provided with handrails. Then, at a place called the *angle*, a couloir of earth runs steeply down onto the Glacier which is here quite flat. One ascends it without the slightest difficulty, towards the Aiguille du Géant which projects like a rocky buttress into the middle of the Glacier. The rapid streams which run on the surface of the ice have here and there hollowed out holes known as *Moulins* which have given their name to the place. Beyond

The Seracs of the Mer de Glace.

Les Moulins the high walls which hem in the lower part of the Glacier expand, and to the left, in an easterly direction the magnificent arena of the Glacier de Talèfre opens out.

This was formerly one of the most frequently visited Glaciers of the whole group. Before the idea of exploring Mont Blanc for its own sake had been conceived, crystal-seekers came to look for crystals at the foot of the Droites and the Courtes which form the far side of this arena. In the centre, stands a small island of rock, about 9830 feet high the Jardin de Talèfre. Every August it is covered with a rich profusion of Alpine flowers, so that this solitary rock, lost and desolate in an immense desert of snow, becomes for a few weeks of the year the most beautiful oasis — a reminder of life in the midst of eternal desolation.

To the East, the Aiguille de Talèfre throws out a long rocky promontory into the middle of this vast hollow. It separates the Glacier de Talèfre from that of Leschaux, which is even wilder. The formidable ramparts of the Grandes Jorasses encircle that austere Glacier with black and frowning heights. To the east, a small snow-filled fissure cuts the cliffs

Aiguille du Dru.

vertically, and one sees at the top a little gap in the sky-line. This Pass is known by the poetic name of *Col des Hirondelles*. One would like to think that the little blue gap was so christened some day when stirred by the rapid flight of these harbingers of spring. But in the *Alpine Journal* Sir Leslie Stephen tells the real story : " On commencing to climb the snowy slope, we saw, lying a little below us, arranged in a circle on the ice, about twenty little black specks, absolutely motionless. On going near we discovered what they were, not, I must own, without a certain sadness.

Ascent of the Aiguille du Géant.

They were bodies; not human bodies, which indeed, from a certain point of view would have been less surprising. These little corpses were the mortal remains of swallows.. They had possibly crowded in together to keep warm, or perhaps they had been overtaken by a storm... They were united in death and seemed strangely pathetic in the midst of that vast solitude of snows ".

Above the hollow of Talèfre the great glacial basin of the Géant opens out in an immense amphitheatre. If the

Aiguille du Géant.

Glacier of Argentière can be compared to a Gothic Cathedral, the Glacier du Géant can be compared to a Temple of the Ancient World. When Vibsanius Agrippa built his famous Pantheon in the centre of the *Campus Martius* at Rome, he must have had some strange subconscious knowledge of this natural amphitheatre. For the arrangement and orientation are the same. A façade to the north, with an imposing Portico of which the two great side pillars still remain, the Aiguille du Plan to the west and the Aiguille du Géant to the East. Endless crumbling tiers called the *Seracs du Géant* still mark the position of the marble steps. One climbs up through them, a wilderness of jagged blocks of ice which form the finest fall of seracs in Europe. This staircase surmounted, one enters the Temple. Its walls are faced with sheets of ice, as the walls of the Pantheon were faced with marble. And in the depth of the walls, as in the Roman Temple, are niches and apses bearing the name of the Aiguilles which crown them.

And as the Pantheon was sacred to all the gods, so the Glacier du Géant is sacred to all the divinities of the mountain. They surround

Mer de Glace and Mont Blanc.

this vast amphitheatre. To the East, which is the left on entering, are the Périades, Mont Mallet, the Aiguille du Géant and the Aiguilles Marbrées. To the south La Vierge, and behind it in succession, the Flambeau and the Tour Ronde. To the West, Mont Maudit, Mont Blanc de Tacul and the Aiguille du Midi. Then towards the North, a little further away

Mont Blanc and Aiguille de Blaitière from the Grands Charmoz.

and crowded together, the divinities of the second class, less perfect than the gods perhaps, but more respected and feared. These are the Grépon, the Grands Charmoz and the République. Before them in the sweep of the horizon are the peaks of the Saumon, Aiguille de la Blaitière, Aiguille Dufour, and Aiguille du Plan. And at the far side of the amphitheatre, flanked by gigantic heights, the supreme divinity, the great dome of Mont Blanc immutable and mysterious, its outline as clean as in the beginning of the world, its snow as pure. For as the Glacier rises towards the heavens, it frees itself of every blemish, so that when it draws near to God, it may be nothing but Splendour, Purity, Ineffable Beauty...

Ascent of the Aiguille du Géant.

For many hours the pilgrim climbs the triumphal staircase, then he ascends a frozen valley which ends in the Col du Géant. Beyond the Col, the mountain plunges almost vertically on Courmayeur, nearly 7.000 feet below, in the high-lying valley of the Doire. And there we are in Italy.

No situation can be compared to that of the Col du Géant. Theodore Camus declared : " Much as I had been told of its marvels, I found the reality more marvellous still... A view such as one gets from a high summit is here within the reach of all, and here one can enjoy it at leisure in the glory of the setting sun or sunrise, or in the pale light of the moon ". A well-built hut, erected by the Italian Alpine Club in 1876 provides comfortable lodging in this eagle's nest, 10,901 feet above the sea; the *Rifugio Albergo Torino.*

Saxifrages.

A few hours suffice to go from the Col du Géant down to Courmayeur. The track, which is quite easy, first runs along above steep cliffs and then crosses granite wastes and rocks till finally a bridle-path which improves as one descends, leads to the Pavilion of Mont Frety. Through a beautiful larch wood one comes presently to Entrèves, whence a line of buses plies to the Italian Chamonix.

On the Grépon.

The panorama from

Requin and Grépon from La Bedière.

the Col du Géant is one of the most famous in the world. From left to right the view extends over the Pennine Alps, Monte Rosa, the Grand Combier, the Matterhorn, the chain of the Grand Paradis, the Grivola, the Grande Casse, the Argentera, the Maritime Alps, the Écrins and

Mont Blanc and pointe Sella.

all the Alps of Dauphiny. Nearer at hand and forming an impressive foreground, one distinguishes the Aiguilles Noire and Blanche of Peteret and the East face of Mont Blanc, which rises 4724 feet above the Col. To the left of them that unrivalled spire known to the French as the Aiguille du Géant and to the Italians as the *Dente del Gigante*.

This mountain remained for long unconquered. The various Aiguilles around it succumbed one by one. The Grandes Jorasses were climbed in 1865; Mont Mallet in 1871; the Aiguille du Rochefort in 1873; the Flambeau and the Aiguille de Saussure in 1876. The Aiguille du Géant alone, thanks to its perpendicular walls, defied all attempts. It was in vain that the foremost climbers of the day laid siege to it; it defied all their efforts. Mummery came in 1880, accompanied by his famous guide

Sunrise on the Seracs of the Géant.

Alexandre Burgner, but he to whom the Grépon had surrendered, had to own himself beaten by the great smooth wall which guards the summit of the Aiguille du Géant.

Rifugio Torino.

Dent du Géant from the shoulder of the Requin.

The Grandes Jorasses and the Glacier of Leschaux from the Couvercle.

In retiring from the unequal struggle, the great climber declared that the ascent was impossible by human means alone. This avowal contained the solution of the problem. In 1882 the brothers Sella installed themselves in the hut on the Géant; they attacked the mountain with chisel and hammer; they bored holes in the rock, fastened in cramp-irons and finally surrounded the great obelisk with a net-work of ropes by which and by the strength of their arms, they hoisted themselves up to the summit. Since that time the Aiguille has often been climbed.

It is an attractive peak, its golden outline seen against the sunset sky seems so far away, so etherial, so illusive. And yet it can be climbed without great exertion; it requires only a steady head and strong arms. Anyone possessing these qualifications can accomplish this wonderful climb, both ascent and descent, in six hours.

One does not even need to leave one's comfortable bed in the Rifugio Torino too soon, for this climb does not start early. Wait till the hot Italian sun has thawed the ropes which the Alpine Club of Italy has fixed to the west face. In midsummer it is soon enough to start at 6 o'clock. That is really the best hour, for the sun has not yet softened the snow

and one quickly and easily reaches the Upper Plateau of the Col du Géant which lies near the Aiguilles Marbrées. From there the ascent is made in two stages. The most difficult feats are reserved for the second stage : to make them easier leave plenty of rope between each climber.

During the first stage the aim is to reach a shoulder to the east of the Aiguille. The climbimg of the first ledges is quite pleasant, the rock is excellent. all over. Then you see a fissure in the rock, sloping certainly, but an ideal fissure as regards size and conven-

The Requin from the Couvercle path.

The summit of the Aiguille de Rochefort.

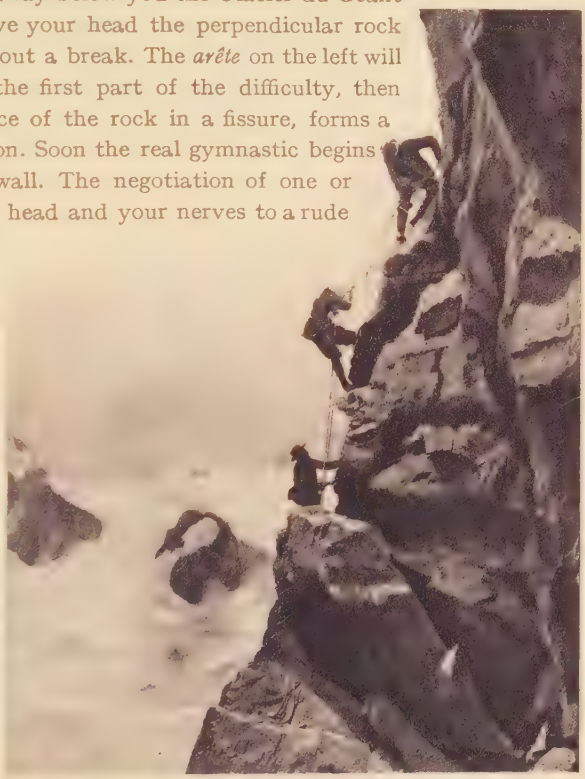
Mont Blanc du Tacul and the Vierge, near the Col du Géant.

ience; you have probably never come across such a useful fissure before. But somehow or other, it soon begins to shrink. What does that matter? It is large enough to hold your right leg and that is surely enough for any self-respecting climber. Not quite so pleasant for the left leg perhaps, which is left to beat time outside, above the abyss. But things soon become more complicated. Your right leg seems to be swelling, it is impossible to keep it in the fissure any longer. Perhaps the fissure is growing smaller? You must content yourself with putting your elbow in the crack, and go boldly on. But a few feet more and you find that your elbow is too big. And then you make a grab at the rope which lies there like a serpent sleeping in its groove in the rock. But keep a few fingers in the crevices of the rock for one should never trust entirely to rope. After all, rock is stronger than hemp.

That is the method by which you reach the *salle à manger*, a little plateau of hard-frozen snow, hanging over empty space at the foot of the Aiguille. The easy part of the ascent is over; now the difficulties begin. You must leave your knapsacks and ice-axes behind you here, but not your hope or your courage, for you will need plenty of both in the adventure that lies before you.

How can one describe this gymnastic feat? — A little cornice to the left enables you to reach the north-west face of the Aiguille where you arrive at the foot of a great smooth wall. Happily ropes succeed each other nearly all the way up. Arms do all the work now; legs merely drum against the rock over the fearful void. You proceed in this way till you come to a great triangular rock. Mummery stopped here and it is called Burgener's rock. Picture to yourself an enormous wall, absolutely smooth, with a slope of 75 degrees, surrounded on three sides by a sheer, aching void, and you may have some slight idea of this rock, though you still lack the impression of that terrifying void, an impression only too present on the spot. Far away below you the Glacier du Géant glitters in the sun. Above your head the perpendicular rock reaches up and up without a break. The *arête* on the left will help you to surmount the first part of the difficulty, then a journey across the face of the rock in a fissure, forms a not too-pleasing diversion. Soon the real gymnastic begins again on the vertical wall. The negotiation of one or two chimneys pus your head and your nerves to a rude test and you suddenly find yourself on the first summit, which slopes in a disquieting way to the Italian side.

The summit of the Aiguille has two peaks, the Sella and the Graham. They are connected by a little narrow, crumbling ledge which looks on each side sheer down a precipice of 1968 feet. It is an aerial and unwished-for journey. Beyond this little ledge there is nothing



Ascent of the Aiguille du Géant

much to mention. Nothing but the void. But the void *is* something when it attains such dimensions,

Courmayeur lies down below, in the deep valley through which the Doire unrolls its silver thread. Towards the south-west the glacial lakes and the great frozen river of the Géant lie sleeping in dread silence at the foot of the Aiguilles of Chamonix.

I cannot speak of them. Guido Rey has rated them too highly, for in them my friend and I were to have made a pious pilgrimage. I wonder if, from the depths of that crevasse, he saw their mysterious outline — if a last vision of the Alps passed before his eyes...

A sea of clouds.

CHAPTER VI

White Shadows.

> We set forth into the Unknown, into Mystery, like a phantom vessel into the Eternal Sea.
>
> Albert Gos.

I suppose it must be put down to over - fatigue — but I have spent a dreadful night at the Rifugio Torino. For hours I have battled with insurmountable difficulties; my over-excited brain made me climb the Aiguille du Géant all over again, step by step. I saw myself seated astride narrow, blood-curdling ledges. I slept on narrow cornices and impossible bivouacs, my throat burning with thirst. All sorts of memories

passed before my eyes and I accompanied myself, at a distance of twenty years, on my first ascent of Mont Blanc.

It began with the preparations; reading the articles in Reviews; studying maps; discussing routes; tapping the barometer hundreds of times. Then the provisions and all the paraphernalia necessary for the expedition, were spread out on the table before being packed into my knapsack. I saw our departure from the busy station, noisy with shrill whistlings and filled with clouds of steam ; saw the slightly hostile curiosity of our travelling companions; the arrival at Fayet-Saint-Gervais.

Rain had begun to fall. We were two modest climbers who had never yet made an expedition in the Mont Blanc range, but we were full of eagerness and courage. We went on that night in the electric railway as far as Les Houches. When we got to the village, the rain had stopped but great black clouds swept every few minutes across the face of the moon. We wandered into the sleeping village in search of lodging for the night. No one would take us in and we finally took

Les Houches and the Aiguille du Midi

Les Houches; Village and Church.

refuge in a dilapidated shed which one of the natives allowed us to occupy for a few hours.

Next morning, in spite of pouring rain, we set off gaily up the path to the Bellevue Chalet and from there climbed through the wood which stretches along beside the Glacier of Bionnassay and leads to the Tête Rousse. Talking of all sorts of things while we walked, we suddenly heard the hollow roar of an avalanche of stones. And a little further on we found our path blocked by it.

We crossed the plateau of Rognes; desolate and arid it gave us an impression of agonizing loneliness. This enormous waste of loose stones forms a huge mound above which we rose gradually, following the path to Tête Rousse and leaving the Glacier de Bionnassay on our right. We stopped for food and rest at the Hotel at the foot of the Aiguille du Goûter, but soon set out again, intending to spend the night at the Vallot Refuge.

To avoid falling stones, frequent at that hour of the day, we decided to climb the Aiguille, not by the usual couloir but by the northern *arête*.

The Chain of Mont Blanc from the Aiguille du Goûter.

It is an interesting climb of 3281 feet, needing some care even in fine weather, but exceedingly difficult in certain atmospheric conditions.

We had hardly commenced the ascent when the sky became black with threatening clouds. The wind began to howl around us. We had to hold on to the rock in order not to be blown off.

Then the storm burst. Sleet began to fall. It lashed our faces as with fire, and the fury of the wind became such that it seemed unwise to stay on the *arête* which was fully exposed to it. And so, leaving the path, we resolved to try our fortune further to the left, amid the dangers of a new route.

Where would this daring adventure lead us? It was difficult to say. This whole region is precipitous; the climb became more difficult as the slope became greater. We clambered on at random among the rocks, in the teeth of the blizzard.

Our gloves were soaked and frozen,

Mist on the Heights.

torn by the jagged rocks. Soon we had to dispense with them for our hands had no sure grip in that half-frozen, half-sticky covering. The sleet froze on to the rock as it fell; our benumbed fingers gave us

Ascent of the Dôme du Goûter.

no security, but we had to push on, in spite of the risk of falling down into the invisible abyss which we knew yawned at our feet.

For two long weary hours we climbed on and on without stopping, against that icy wind which caught our breath. At the end of that interminable climb, it was granted to us to strike the end of the Plateau, covered by a deep fall of snow in which we sank up to our waists.

It was horribly cold. The Plateau, ceaselessly swept by the wind, was as inhospitable a place as could well be imagined. The blizzard was absolutely blinding; a few feet from me my companion in misfortune was nothing but a grey and almost invisible shadow. Where was the Refuge? It was impossible to see anything through the storm. We turned round

The Chalet of Tête Rousse and the Glacier of Bionnassay.

to seek shelter, but in vain; we would have to spend the night out there on the heights, in the frozen snow. Suddenly my friend shouted and pointed to a black rectangular shadow a few yards away. It was the door, or rather the doorway of the Refuge; the door itself had disappeared.

The shed was full of powdery snow and so low that we could not stand upright in it. What did that matter? It was a shelter in which we could pass the night, for there was now no hope of reaching the Vallot Refuge that day. But the shed was in a state of unimaginable dirt and confusion. The wind swept through it. The tarpaulin which had once covered the roof had disappeared, and the stove — without its chimmey — lay in pieces on the frozen floor. One

The Chalet of Tête Rousse.

joy remained. There was a little wood. We looked at it affectionately.

We tried in vain to light the fire. We only succeeded in smoking ourselves out. We had to go outside to avoid being suffocated. Happily the storm had whirled off to other heights, disclosing a magnificent sunset, a sight which made us forget cold and fatigue. The sun sank gradually behind a curtain of clouds which its radiance lit up with blood-red lights.

The gale, sweeping the heavens, massed the clouds on the horizon; then with a sudden gust, swept them over in our direction. They raced on to the lower peaks which broke them up, while the sun stained them with purple lights. Everything around us was red and glowing; the glaciers sparkled like rubies, the Arve was like a river of blood, the mists seemed to drench Chamonix in their blood-red vapours... A symphony in red, which faded away with the setting sun, as a song dies away when the singer disappears round a bend in the path...

The clouds broke against the Aiguille du Goûter, then rolled down into the abyss only to rise again. For a moment the Aiguille emerged victorious. We took advantage of the momentary clearing to look down on Tête Rousse which we saw far away below us. There were people moving about outside the hut, black specks on the whiteness of the Glacier. We shouted to them in vain. The wind swept our cries away to other heights.

The Vallot Refuge.

We had said

The old Cabane du Goûter.

our last farewell to our fellow-men. We were alone in this overwhelming and agonizing solitude. And in moments of depression the mind fears all sorts of imaginary dangers; it has a dread of the Unknown, of the Beyond. Temporarily deprived of human companionship we were possessed and crushed by an indefinable but irresistible apprehension.

It was that wonderful hour when fading daylight veils the shapes of surrounding things. In a warm comfortable room one waits gladly till night has blotted out the familiar shapes, before lighting the lamp. One's feet on the fender, one likes to watch the flames dancing on the hearth. It is a peculiarly delightful time of day when one's thoughts wander at will, when one gives oneself up to the charm of the hour, beloved of the dog and the wolf, thankful to be calm and care-free, appreciating the blessings of a stout roof, congenial companionship and good health.

As for us, lost in the midst of icy solitudes, we watched the sleet winding a white and impenetrable veil around us. But we gave thanks for our good fortune in arriving in time. A few minutes later and we should have lost our way and beaten about in vain in the storm. If we had shouted, the wind alone would have answered our cries.

The snow continued relentlessly, and a white night is more terrifying than the blackest of black nights, because it is more mysterious. The imprisoned mind beats in vain against the stupor which overpowers it. Having gone back into the hut we waited silently, full of vague dejected

thoughts and when the real night fell at last, it came to second the efforts of the white night in destroying our strength of mind.

Total obscurity reigned outside. The gap of the absent door opened on a void. We lighted our lantern. With its feeble light our hopes revived: a bright spot in the darkness towards which our eyes turned with joy. Its light dissipated the shadows which filled the hut and at the same time lighted a ray of hope in our hearts. The horror had disappeared; life revived and centred round that pale and vacillating flame.

The night passed slowly without sleep, in alternations of the fearful howling of the wind and the sudden calm which was even more terrible. When the wind ceased, silence and the night resumed their sway, a dreadful silence which worked on our imaginations perhaps more than the storm, it seemed almost as if the silence howled in its turn.

The snow fell softly with an almost imperceptible sound, like the faint rustle of crape over the turf of some deserted burying-ground, a sad, monotonous music, like the cradle songs they sing softly in the mountains, while rocking the new-born baby to sleep. It cradled us too, with its gentle murmur, as if to lull us into that sleep from which there should be no awakening.

Suddenly in the enervation of that sleepless night, I began to think of Victor

Seracs on Mont Blanc.

Hugo's Djinns; it was their howls I heard outside, their claws scraping over the roof of the hut. Mechanically I repeated the words :

The Aiguille de Bionnassay and the new Cabane du Goûter.

Prophète si ta main me sauve
De ces impurs demons des soirs
J'irai prosterner mon front chauve...

I reflected as I said these lines, that my demons were white, and that broke the thread of my thoughts and made me forget the rest. I tried feverishly to remember the next verse, but I tried in vain, for my mind was empty. The wind had swept my wandering thoughts over the precipice with the snowflakes —

Prophète si ta main me sauve...

I repeated the verse like a schoolboy saying a badly learnt lesson. I tried to think of something else, to get away from that foolish obsession, but the words returned again and again, tormenting, melancholy, illusive —

Prophète si ta main me sauve...

A Search Party after an accident.

At last! A pale light filtered in between the planks as if hesitating to enter this cold, gloomy place. It was indeed a melancholy dawn. Outside every thing was white. The rocks by which we had climbed up yesterday were frozen over. Our retreat was cut off. We must complete our calvary. And so we set out for the Dôme, moving slowly over the soft snow, while little by little the daylight strenghthened and the heavens cleared.

It was desperately cold on the *arête*. The snow loosened by the footsteps of my friend was blown up in my face. The sleet whirled around us forming a broken column, white and transparent. It gradually dispersed and the wind set to making other columns — a wild dance of white and vapourous shades like elves or goblins.

The sky was now very clear, but towards the west a narrow band of black streaked the heavens, the mysterious signal of another storm. We pushed on by the Dôme and the Col du Dôme to the Vallot Refuge which we saw close at hand on a little eminence. We could surely reach it before the storm burst.

Crossing a crevasse at the foot of the Aiguille du Midi.

A Storm near the Grands Mulets.

But hunger had weakened us; our tired feet stumbled on the fresh snow and the steep slope. And the clouds gathered, the wind rose. We would need to hurry if we were to reach safety before the snow overwhelmed us. At last, after superhuman efforts we got to the Refuge just as the storm caught us up. But *it* was too late. We had won.

Our joy was short-lived. The first room, which served as kitchen, was in indescribable disorder. Broken bottles, crusts of bread and empty jam-jars strewed the floor. One of the benches was broken. The stove was in pieces, its different parts scattered about. The windows were broken. All this impressed us disagreably and we went through into the second room with some apprehension.

The same disorder reigned there.

The blankets were tossed about, the mattresses covered with crumbs; a palliasse lay on the floor covered with ice. While consigning those who had thus sacked the Refuge to perdition, we began to try to pull it straight, but the rapidly rising gale tore through the chinks of the badly-

fitting door and we tried to stop it up with a blanket. Before making it fast we went out for a moment to take a look round the hut.

Mists of ill-omen were creeping cunningly round the summit of Mont Blanc. The gale was increasing in violence; the climax of the storm was imminent. Another gust of wind and the mist was upon us. The storm burst with it, bringing its dreary retinue of frost and snow.

The Séracs of the Jonction.

The Refuge was about to become our prison. How long should we be snowed up there? No one could tell, and we thought anxiously of our families, awaiting our return that very night. They might perhaps await it for ever.

We lay down to await the night. Outside the storm continued. The day passed wearily away, terrible from the disquieting thought of being prisoners there perhaps for days, — for in mid-September the storms last some time. We could not dare to hope for fine weather next morning as so often happens after a summer storm.

Night fell with all its horrors. The storm was at its height. I went out to fetch some snow to melt and drink, and fastened the door quickly

behind me to prevent the snow from drifting in. I was alone outside in utter darkness. There was something sinister and terrifying about it. The wind tried to tear me from the narrow platform outside the hut.

Ascent of Mont Blanc.

Silent flashes of lightning intermittently lit up the hurricane. Then everything suddenly turned red around me. Every particle of snow whirling through space was lit up and sparkled ruby-red, like drops of blood falling on a purple carpet. The noise was horrible.

I hurriedly filled the bucket with snow, and half-frozen, went in again. Thin soup made of a few scraps left over from the day before and mixed with much snow, constituted our scanty meal. Then we stretched ourselves out on the straw mattresses and put out the lantern so as to save our candle. Lying close together for warmth, under a heap of blankets, we felt a sensation of warmth and well-being for the first time in forty-eight hours. It was comforting to hear the wind raging outside and know we were in shelter. Next morning we should have lukewarm tea, for we had filled a flask with tea and sugar and snow, and put it

between us that the heat of our bodies might melt the snow. The wind shook the hut horribly, as if irritated to find something which resisted it in that Pass where it was accustomed to reign alone; something which even its terrifying music could not lure into the wild dance of death executed out there in the darkness by white and whirling shadows.

Next morning the howling of the gale wakened us. What were we to do in this incessant storm and cold? There was nothing for it but patience. Outside still the same white relentless scene. What did that disquieting white curtain hide from us in its mysterious folds?

Silence lay heavy on the Refuge; we heard nothing but the roar of the wind which howled dismally in the chimney of the empty stove. Sad and silent we awaited the fury of each gust. The shed trembled under these incessant attacks.

Hôtel at the Grands Mulets.

We had written our names in the visitors book. These few words might be the last traces anyone would find of us. By the time the guides read these words, we should perhaps be lying lifeless at the foot of some crevasse — our spirits might be dancing with those white shadows which whirled over the *arêtes* in the dance of death.

For we would have to set out. It was no use waiting till hunger sapped our energy or the ever-deepening snow made our going more uncertain and covered the yawning

crevasses with treacherous bridges of snow. Roped together we opened the door. What conditions met our eyes! Everything was white, the gale raged with unheard-of fury. We hesitated for a moment. It must indeed be a desperate situation which forced us to take our chance of being lost in that white waste; blinded by the snow, frozen by the cold, suffocated by the wind and the impalpable powdery snow which we breathed in and which froze our breath. It would be madness to venture out in such a storm. We would remain.

Remain? But that meant cold and hunger.

But to go on meant yawning crevasses, losing our way! And yet, when all was said and done, it meant life. We would go out to seek it, across that waste of ice and snow.

We had shut the door of the Refuge and were only a few steps from it. But already it had disappeared. It would be impossible to find it again. What abyss would we fall down? Which crevasse awaited us? Perhaps we had already strayed from the path. I could hardly see my companion through the blizzard.

We walked for hours through the same whiteness, the same bitter cold, the same incessant snow. It covered our clothes, freezing on to what it found already frozen there and enclosing us in a shell of ice which crackled with every

The ascent of Mont Blanc from Grands Mulets.

A Descent..

movement. I was dying of thirst. My gloves had been torn in the climb up the Aiguille du Goûter and my fingers, sticking through the holes, froze on to the iron of my ice-axe. How thirsty I was! The blood beat in my temples; I thought my head would burst, but the cold gripped it as with an iron band.

We stumbled on indefinitely, monotonously, interminably, the same anxiety constantly in our minds — were we going in the right direction? We were walking at random through this terrible white night. What o'clock was it? My watch had stopped. It seemed centuries since we left the Refuge. We should have reached the Grand Mulets long ago. We had certainly lost our way.

Lost. I said the word softly to myself and the idea grew and magnified in my brain. It seemed certain that we had lost our way in that impenetrable whiteness. We were exerting ourselves uselessly in this mysterious obscurity where every step perhaps led us further astray. What was the use of going on?

It would be better to lie down on that soft white snow and sleep. I was overpowered with sleep : the wind beating ceaslessly in my face was sending me to sleep : my legs were numb with exhaustion. I felt inclined in my stupour to go and dance with these whirling shadows. It would be better to stop there and join the dance at once — seeing that we were certainly lost, strayed beyond all hope...

In a few dozen years the glacier would give our bodies up to the light of day, down there on the moraine of Les Bossons. The natives of Chamonix would be surprised to see us. But they would not really see us. We should long since have been dancing on the snow to the frenzied music of the storm.

At anyrate, it was all up with us... — Something passed over my eyes. I was no longer oppressed. I no longer felt the wind, or the snow, or the cold. Something black rose up before me. Everything round me seemed lit up by a thousand lights.

And I saw that under a sudden squall, the thick clouds had been torn asunder. I saw an immense slope, cut up by crevasses, dazzlingly blue. To the right, just in front of us was a rocky Aiguille. We saw a smoking chimney; it was the hut on the Grands Mulets. Behind us a pretty little pink cloud, light and coquettish, veiled the summit of Mont Blanc. It was our winding-sheet.

From the platform of the Grands Mulets people were waving to us, calling to us. Oh! to sleep, to sleep quietly in safety...

Grandes Jorasses.

To sleep? — But just then I was wakened by the noise of my neighbours, setting off in their turn no doubt, to climb the Aiguille du Géant.

Now wide awake, I continued the course of my dream in recalling the various ascents of Mont Blanc I had afterwards made. I thought especially of one made in the company of a guide from Oisans, who, eager to know all the Alps and not only those of his own district, asked me one day if I would reclimb Mont Blanc with him. He would take no refusal. He had so often felt the thrilling moments of dangerous climbs that he wished to experience the ascent of great snow couloirs. And where could he sample them better than on Mont Blanc ?

We took advantage of settled weather and again I beheld these immense wastes of white and blue, furrowed by formidable crevasses, these fields of snow, now glittering in the sun, which before I had seen shrouded in melancholy mists. The contrast was amazing. But forgetting past dangers, I gave myself up to the delight of the moment and by a route of absolute enchantment, again climbed the highest summit in Europe.

A Flok of Sheep on the Col du Géant.

The Casino of Chamonix.

CHAPTER VII

Snow on the Heights

Seigneurs, ce fut en cel termine
Que li douz temps d'esté décline
Et Yver revient en saison.
Roman de RENART.

I should have suspected this last night and not waited indefinitely on the Aiguille du Géant, exulting in the blue sky. At this late season the weather changes quickly. The sky was too lovely, too transparent, the distant mountains too clear. And that terrible night of wind was a sure sign of coming storm. Today everything round the *Rifugio Albergo Torino* is white; snow has fallen heavily on the heights and has even covered the higher pastures. The descent promises to be a tiring one, through soft, fresh snow.

Skating-rink, Chamonix.

The shepherds, wakening earlier than usual this morning, were surprised to find the light already streaming into their huts. They hastily put their modest bundles together, anxious to reach the lower pastures as soon as possible. The exodus of the four-footed population had begun. Driving their flocks in front of them and leading the mules laden with the late-born lambs, the shepherds moved off, leaving their Chalets deserted. They disappeared into the forest, underneath its green, snow-powdered canopy, accompanied by the tinkling of big and little bells.

For many long months, silence will reign on these high frozen pastures. One will hardly even hear the muffled sound of the streams flowing under the snow. Farewell to the slow, sad songs of the shepherds. The only music the mountains will know will be the whistling

Winter in the valley of Chamonix.

of the icy wind through the fir trees, and the sighing of the branches bent under its mighty sweep.

I think revengefully of that visitant of last night, with its depressing retinue of cold and grey skies. I hope the swallows were prudent and sped through that narrow Col beside the Grandes Jorasses without mishap, and that they have now swooped down with cries of joy on to the sunny plains of Italy. Chamonix, behind that impassable wall of ice and granite which stretches away to the north as far as the eye can see, must now fall back on her own resources, accustom herself to the cold, to deserted streets, closed shops and to the pale lamps which surround her like tapers round a bier.

— Chamonix dead during the winter? Melancholy under a grey sky?

— But I am talking like a native of the plains! For it is only in the plains that the snow is regarded as an enemy. In the mountains the enchantment continues. In a few weeks the giants which surround me will be sitting, robed in ermine dalmatics, round a completely restored Temple, veneered with white marble of an even more lovely purity than that of the day before yesterday. In the woods, the rime, frozen crystal-

Col des Montets, winter.

Mont Blanc Railway.

white on the branches, will light up the perpetual mourning of the fir-trees and on the neighbouring slopes the happy voices of the ski-runners will awaken the echoes! For Chamonix the winter is no long white reel, to be wound off in interminable and monotonous days. Far from that, the winter days are too short to enjoy all the delights they bring.

There is first of all the joy of skating on that immense sheet of ice, unique in its magnificent setting of snowy mountains. Then the intoxicating delight of swift descents down the bobsleigh run, winding round and round like an enormous cork screw. Better than either of those the ski-ing expeditions over the vast snow fields of the Col de la Voza or the Col de Balme. Best of all perhaps, that classic expedition, the tour of Mont Blanc by the Col and the Croix du Bonhomme.

Each day brings new delights. When he hears the ice on the pavement crackle under the milkman's feet in the early morning, it is time for the ski-runner to be off, leaving Chamonix sleeping behind him. In the crispness of the clear frosty morning, he climbs the slopes while

the first smoke from the Chalets rises in the still air. He goes eagerly up through the great fir trees covered with hoar frost. He pushes on into the welcome silence of the forest and soon reaches the high pastures where he rests in the hot sun. Then, when oblique rays bring out violet shadows on the snow, he lets himself glide gently down into the valley, in a glissade which has the grace and harmony of flight.

Night overtook us on our way down, just below Montenvers, on that old path formerly used by the crystal-seekers. The valley was once more calm and still. The gentle breeze which rose towards the heights seemed to bear a soft confusion of encouragements and promises — the murmur of the trees brushing softly against each other, the roaring of the waterfalls, and at intervals, after a stronger puff of wind, the faint sound of distant music, so faint that one had to strain one's ears to catch it above the deep, majestic voices of the mountain. As we descended lights pierced the obscurity of the valley — the lights of Chamonix so small in the immensity of the mountains, lying on the borders of those great woods through which the gleaming silver of the Glaciers had stretched for centuries.

Aiguille du Géant and Mont Mallet.

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